ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: THE ART OF ARCHAEOLOGY: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROCESS IN THE WORK OF ROBERT SMITHSON, MARK DION, AND FRED WILSON

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This dissertation discusses the relationship between contemporary artwork and current archaeological theory and practice. I argue that contemporary art and scientific archaeology are both practices conducted in the present facing similar issues, such as the need to attend to power relations between past and present, and the documentation and representation of ephemeral activities. Because artists and archaeologists offer different responses to those similar issues, contemporary artwork can help materialize the very process of doing and theorizing archaeology by making its contradictions and *modus operandi* visible.

I focus on both the social context and the circulation and reception of the work of American artists Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson. The specific artworks in question are all ephemeral, site-specific installations that have been recorded through photographs. Although Smithson, Dion, and Wilson do not intend to comment theoretically on archaeological practice, the nature of their own creative process reproduces archaeology's dynamics posing metaphors that resonate with postprocessual

archaeologies, particularly with the practice of British archaeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley. I propose that the basis of the resonance between the work of the artists and the archaeologists' stems from their ability to blur the boundaries of each discipline.

The work of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson has only been partially compared with archaeological practice. This dissertation underscores how artists and archaeologists rethought their fields after the advent of postmodernism, as well as to what extent, and why, those redefinitions are similar. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the groundbreaking work of Smithson in the late 1960s not only was influential to later generations of artists such as Dion and Wilson, but also seemed to anticipate by over ten years many postulates of archaeology's own self-critique.

THE ART OF ARCHAEOLOGY:
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROCESS IN THE WORK OF ROBERT SMITHSON, MARK DION, AND FRED WILSON

by

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In memory of Kathy Canavan

1954-2004

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The Problem

In 1986, British archaeologist Ian Hodder published *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, reproducing René Magritte's *The Red Model* on the cover and *Asaraton 1976 (Unswept floor)* by Mags Harries inside (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).[1] Hodder did not make any reference to either artwork in the text; he only acknowledged them in the preface to the second edition of the volume:

> I was attracted to the Mag Harries work partly for superficial reasons like the newspaper embedded in the pavement—a pun for 'reading the past'. Also, the scatter of artifacts, durable on the pavement, seemed an appropriate metaphor for an archaeology brought into the present and made active. But somehow it was the fleeting foot that was most evocative, like Magritte's feet which are set below a poster on the fence, amongst stone and dirt, but uncertain and in the process of transformation. The boots of the archaeologist, feet of clay, often appear bogged down in the reality of the past. Would that foot simply pass by leaving an empty trace or would the boots be filled with the person of the archaeologist and with the meaning of the past? It is my hope that the archaeology of the 1990s will grasp the issue of interpretation more fully and more critically, and this book is my contribution to that task.[2]

As Hodder hoped, the archaeology of the 1990s did grasp the issue of interpretation both fully and critically. And so did much of contemporary installation art. Not only do artworks continue visually to spark metaphors relevant to current archaeological approaches, but they also put forth a cultural critique that resonates with those theories. Building on a post/anti-modernist tradition that started in the 1960s, many artists have since created projects that account for the present social assumptions that mediate the construction of history. Despite the resonance of both critiques, however, most archaeologists—including

[1] Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1986].
[2] Hodder, *Reading the Past*, xiv.

Hodder, still use this kind of artwork merely to illustrate their books.[3] Except for a few cases, artworks play no further role in the content of archaeology texts themselves.

But why should texts on archaeology include deeper analysis of artworks? How, and why, can artworks contribute to complicate archaeological theoretical debate and practice? How and why are the critiques that both practices advance conceptually related? This dissertation will address these, among other questions, by exploring the nature of the relationship between contemporary artwork and current archaeological theory and practice. In the process, it will specifically examine the work of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson, three American artists who represent two different generations within the period of postmodern art. While Smithson was active in the 1960s and early 1970s, Dion and Wilson began their artistic production in the early 1980s, almost a decade after Smithson's accidental death. Additionally, current critical approaches to archaeology fall under the umbrella of "postprocessual" archaeology, which aside from a general self-reflexive impetus involves diversity and lack of consensus.[4] Therefore, I will limit this comparative analysis to

[3] See for example Julian Thomas, ed. *Interpretive Archaeology: A Reader*, London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000, featuring *Green Leaf* by Tony Cragg; Ian Hodder, ed. *Archaeological Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, portraying *Raiding Neptune's Vault* by Mark Dion; and Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, with Anselm Kiefer's *Twilight of the West*. Hodder's book includes a chapter on "Archaeological Representation: The Visual Conventions for Constructing Knowledge about the Past," by Stephanie Moser, 262-83. The author, however, writes about representations of archaeology's objects of study throughout history. Michael Shanks's chapter "Culture/Archaeology: The Dispersion of a Discipline and Its Objects," 284-305, points to the reason why Dion's work illustrates the cover, without referring to it explicitly.

[4] As I will discuss extensively in the first chapter, postprocessual archaeologies conform to a group of approaches that develop from a critique of that which went before, processual archaeology. Processual archaeology flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, placing an emphasis on science and objectivity that supported only one approach and methodology to study the past. Following Hodder (*Reading the Past*, 181), postprocessual archaeology "is characterized by debate and uncertainty about fundamental issues that may have been rarely questioned before in archaeology. It is more an asking of questions than a provision of answers." Thus, although a variety of very different perspectives could be described as postprocessual, they often place emphasis on the individual, agency, historical contexts, and meaning.

the work of British archaeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, which is particularly well suited to the projects of the three artists.[5]

My approach to the work of Smithson, Dion, and Wilson follows Alfred Gell's notion of an "anthropology of art" that focuses on the social context of art production, as well as its circulation, and reception.[6] As I will discuss in Chapter One, by considering the web of social relations in which artworks are embedded, Gell moves away from a narrow understanding of both art and anthropology. Works of art no longer need to pertain to remote and exotic subject matters to be anthropological or, by default, archaeological. The same is true for the artworks that I selected to examine in this research; they do not always bear formal or metaphorical associations with the *objects* of archaeology as much as with the *practice* of archaeology itself. Moreover, I will demonstrate in the pages ahead that, even if Smithson, Dion, and Wilson do not intend to comment deliberately on archaeological practice, the nature of their own creative process reproduces archaeology's dynamics.

The artworks in question are all ephemeral, site-specific installations that have been recorded through photographs. Smithson's *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, 1969, consists of a travelogue plus a series of photographs of twelve mirrors that he placed in different locations of the Yucatán peninsula. The photographs address issues about definition of space recalling archaeological concepts of reconnaissance, surface survey, and documentation of sites. Dion's *Tate Thames Dig,* 1999, and *New England Digs*, 2001, comprise arrangements of the cultural materials that the artist retrieved while beachcombing the banks of the Thames and in New England. By recreating the environments where archaeologists work, Dion questions archaeology's ordering of space through classifications

[5] Unless noticed, I will use the term postprocessual as well as its variations to specifically refer to the perspective of these two archaeologists.
[6] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropology of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 3.

and typologies. Finally, in Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, 1992-1993, and *Mixed Metaphors*, 1993, held at the Maryland Historical Society and the Seattle Art Museum, respectively, the artist juxtaposed objects from the permanent collections of the host institutions, but in ways never thought of before. Wilson delves into the perception of space alluding to archaeology's manipulative efforts to theorize and represent the past in the museum.

My ability to propose a comparative analysis between the work of Smithson, Dion, and Wilson and archaeological practice is, itself, indebted to archaeology's postprocessualist turn. Shanks and Tilley consider archaeology as a social and political practice and therefore the historical context of its production (e.g., ideology, values, power relations) is as important as the results of that production (knowledge).[7] By arguing for a resonance between the work of the three artists and the one of Shanks and Tilley I thereby endorse the latter's perspective. I must clarify from the outset that far from presenting these individuals as the bearers of truth in either art or archaeology, I seek to highlight the specific ways in which they inform, complicate, and complement each other's practice.

A fundamental claim of this dissertation is that contemporary art and scientific archaeology are both practices conducted in the present; they are conditioned by the cultural logic of late capitalism. They face similar issues, such as the need to attend to power relations between past and present and the documentation and representation of ephemeral activities. Because artists and archaeologists offer different responses to those similar issues, I argue that contemporary artwork can help materialize the very process of doing and theorizing archaeology by making its contradictions and *modus operandi* visible.

[7] See Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987].

Contexts of Production

Key to my comparative analysis of contemporary artwork and archaeological practice is the assessment of their contexts of production. I pay particular attention to the historical coordinates in which the practices take place, the elements that make each practice/discipline unique, and the location of each practice within its larger institutional framework.

On a historical level, the generational gap between Smithson and the other artists helps to facilitate rather than hinder the comparative endeavor. I will examine to what extent and why the groundbreaking work of Smithson in the late 1960s was influential to later generations of artists, such as Dion and Wilson, and, also, seems to anticipate by almost fifteen years many postulates of archaeology's self-critique. At the root of this issue lies the types of sources that inform both practices. I will argue that a common thread between these artists and archaeologists is their ability to borrow conceptual models from both the sciences and the humanities stepping outside the boundaries of their own fields. One wonders, however, does the passage of time affect the ways in which Smithson and those who succeeded him interpret those models? Can models be timeless?

The second level of contextual inquiry aims to assess the degree of variation with which artists and archaeologists manifest their critical discourse. I will ask what are the elements/skills that make each practice/practitioner unique. Because Dion's dig projects are the works that most explicitly refer to archaeological practice, I will look at the ways in which his representation of the archaeological process coincide or collide with the ones that archaeologists choose to represent themselves. I will suggest that attentiveness to the work of artists might help archaeologists create distance with their own practice, employ humor, and make its private affairs public in material form.

Finally, I will consider the place of each artist and archaeologist within its larger institutional framework: the art world, the museum, or the discipline of archaeology. Whether the artists and archaeologists, as well as the ideas that they put forth, are at the center or the periphery, the question becomes what are the implications for making an impact on society? The work of Wilson *inside* museums makes it especially suitable for evaluating its own transcendence.

The Role of Autobiography

Any attempt to contextualize somebody else's practice must consider the context of the one who writes it. I am a professional archaeologist. I received training in anthropological archaeology at the University of Chile in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and I have been engaged in archaeological investigation ever since. The connections I formulate in this dissertation would not have been possible if it were not for such experience. Seemingly, my interest in the dialogue between archaeology and contemporary art stemmed from witnessing my father's relationship to visual matters. As a visual artist, his approach to imagery strongly differs from the one in which my colleagues and I attempted to understand ancient visual culture.

In order to explore the relationship between archaeological practice and art any further, I realized that first I had to lose myself as an archaeologist. If I kept interrogating artworks (including rock art, which has been the subject of most of my archaeological research) as an archaeologist, I would only receive answers for an archaeologist. This dissertation will attempt to bring my archaeological and art historical identities together, making each sensibility work in the same direction instead of remaining in conflict. The lack

of a formal dialogue between the two fields forced me to craft an interface at the risk of oversimplification. If anything, this research will contribute to interweave a common ground for further discussion between both disciplines.

Outline of The Dissertation: The Archaeological Process

To underscore the comparative analysis between the work of the three American artists and archaeological practice, I have organized this dissertation by mimicking the format of a standard process of archaeological investigation. Thus, I restrict that which archaeologists do in the practice to the procedure of research, and name it "archaeological process." Each chapter coincides with one of the five main stages of archaeological investigation: research design, fieldwork, analysis, interpretation and display, and publication.[8] Such a choice fulfills a thematic approach to my research since each stage unites similar concerns raised either intentionally or unintentionally by both artists and archaeologists.

Since the 1980s, several postprocessual archaeologists have argued that interpretation is not exclusive to one stage of the archaeological process, but occurs at many levels of the research experience.[9] I certainly agree. Although Chapters Four and Five indeed contain more synthetic interpretations, they do not prevent the other chapters from presenting interpretive assumptions. Moreover, all five chapters required the acquisition of information, analysis, and interpretation. Seemingly, although one could relate each artist's artwork to every step of the process, I arbitrarily assigned only one stage to each. I hope that while the

[8] See for example, Brian M. Fagan, *In the Beginning: An Introduction to Archaeology*, Upper Saddler River-NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001, 92-98.
[9] See for example Ian Hodder, *The Archaeological Process: An Introduction*, Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

manuscript unfolds it will prove that segregating issues in chapters is effective insofar as a methodological strategy.

In Chapter One, *Research Design: Art and Archaeology and Back Again,* I lay out the general context for the dissertation. I first trace the historiography of scholarship that brings together art and archaeology to then place my own research within such a landscape. Several questions arise: why only recently have archaeologists addressed contemporary artwork in their own practice? What are the theoretical underpinnings that enable them to do so? I then proceed to situate the work of Smithson, Dion, and Wilson within the history of art practice and art criticism, as well as postprocessual archaeology within the history of archaeological thought. I suggest that despite the chronological lag between the two shifts of paradigm (Modern to postmodern, processual to postprocessual) they echo one another.

Chapter Two, *Fieldwork: Robert Smithson*, focuses on the work of Robert Smithson with particular attention to his *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, 1969. I examine the problems encountered by Smithson regarding the definition of space and compare them with archaeology's spatial dilemmas in the stage of fieldwork. I assess the sources that inform Smithson's work and make it resonate with the postulates of Shanks and Tilley, paying special attention to the chronological distance between them. Chapter Three, *Analysis: Mark Dion*, explores the "archaeological" projects of Dion in London and New England in relation to the ordering of things in space. I argue that Dion's commentary on classificatory procedures as well as the strategies that enable him to make that commentary differ from the ones archaeologists normally use.

Chapter Four, *Interpretation and Display: Fred Wilson*, investigates the material consequences of interpretation that Wilson reveals in his installations at the Maryland

Historical Society and the Seattle Art Museum. Since interpretation is not exclusive to this stage of the archaeological process, I recapitulate the major issues brought up in the preceding chapters and connect them with Wilson's. While examining the impact of Wilson's work in the museum, I question its impact in the archaeological discipline: is there actual fluidity of ideas between the fields of art (history) and archaeology? The final chapter, *Publication: Conclusion*, addresses the politics of writing about the past, be it contemporary artworks, or archaeological remains. I will argue that this very dissertation is a political document of past events, revealing the material residues of several circumstances that mediated its final outcome. My own practice reveals itself as social and historically bounded.

Chapter 1. Research Design:
From Archaeology to Art and Back Again

> It is perhaps not so much the results of archaeological or historical investigation that matter but their practice and the nature of their effects.
> Christopher Tilley[10]

Introduction

The history of dialogue between contemporary art and archaeology dates to the early 1990s when a group of archaeologists, primarily British, began to look at their own practice as a process. Due to such a critical approach to their professional practice they recognized parallels between the archaeological experience and that of the visual arts. The resulting scholarship oscillates between the analysis of artwork that echoes archaeology as a social practice; the application of artistic strategies to their own archaeological practice, or a combination of both.

In his book *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology,* of 1992, Michael Shanks referred to excavation as theatre and thus dramatic performance.[11] Although the analogy between excavation and theater had already been advanced by Christopher Tilley three years earlier, Shanks took it a step further by adding the visual arts into the equation.[12] He conceived of excavation as a process of active production of material remains and compared it with performance art.[13] According to Shanks, when the archaeologist conducts his/her job in the excavation site, he/she echoes the active experience that originally occurred

[10] Christopher Tilley, "Claude Lévi-Strauss: Structuralism and Beyond," *Reading Material Culture. Structuralism, Hermeneutics and Post-Structuralism*, ed. Christopher Tilley, Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 77.
[11] Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
[12] Christopher Tilley, "Excavation as Theater," *Antiquity* 63, (1989): 275-80.
[13] Shanks uses Richard Long's "walks" as examples to illustrate his point.

in that place. Shanks also commented on the role of photography to document archaeological performance. Rather than using photographs as "pictorial atmosphere" or as "objective witness" of the past, he opts to use them as fragmented documents of the archaeological process taking the example of the photomontage of Dada artists and John Heartfield.[14] The photographic assemblages with which he documents his own archaeological experience, and that one finds throughout the book, however, are more like David Hockney's *Cameraworks*.[15]

In 1993, the theatre/archaeology paradigm incorporated the insights of archaeologist Julian Thomas and performer Mike Pearson.[16] The discussion revolved exclusively around the dramatic aspects of the relation between theatre and archaeology, bringing up parallels with the language of theatre and film. Although Thomas and Pearson offered a few references to the visual arts they were limited to the performative work of Laurie Anderson, Brian Eno, Robert Wilson, Peter Greenaway, and Pearson himself. Almost ten years later, Shanks and Pearson published the book *Theatre/Archaeology*, which systematized and refined the trajectory of the discussion.[17] Although the authors extend their comparison to the work of Yves Kline, Jackson Pollock, Christian Boltansky, Cornelia Parker, and Andy Goldsworthy, they did so rather succinctly, choosing to emphasize the performative component of the artists' work.[18]

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[14] Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, 184. The author comes back to this idea in "Photography and Archaeology," *The Cultural Life of Images: Visual Representation in Archaeology*, ed. Brian L. Molineaux, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 86.

[15] Although Hockney's *Cameraworks* are listed in the bibliography (Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, 219), Shanks makes no direct reference to them in the text.

[16] Mike Pearson, "Theatre/Archaeology," *The Drama Review* 38, vol. 4, (1994): 133-61.

[17] Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

[18] At times, Shanks's and Pearson's heavy emphasis on performance jeopardizes other problems encountered by archaeologists—and artists—throughout their own performances. In addition, by regarding every activity as a dramatic performance one wonders whether Shanks and Pearson are, as they claim, really able to see themselves as actors not only when they perform science, but also when they perform the theatre of life.

Almost concurrently with the publication of *Theatre/Archaeology*, Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender briefly, although insightfully, discussed the work of a group of visual artists, including Goldsworthy and Robert Smithson.[19] They considered contemporary environmental art as a means to assist their phenomenological interpretation of prehistoric lifeworlds. Making reference to the work of Christo and René Magritte, the scholars themselves produced installation artworks, such as wrapping up stones with cloth or plastic tape, and capturing views of the landscape with a wooden door-frame. Additionally, they reproduced the Hockney-inspired photo technique of Shanks to document their experience of the site.

Most recently, Colin Renfrew published the book *Figuring it Out: What Are We? Where Do We Come From? The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists*, which offers an extensive review of twentieth-century Western visual art in relation to archaeology.[20] His approach is slightly different from that of Shanks and Pearson.[21] Although he is aware of it, Renfrew does not focus on the mediating status of archaeological practice nor does he look at it as an artwork itself. He explores the relationship between artist and the material world considering one of the central questions that guide archaeological inquiry about the past—how we come to understand our place in this world. Except for Mark Dion and Marcel Duchamp, Renfrew covers the work of mostly British artists, paying particular attention to that of Richard Long and William Turnbull.

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[19] Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender, "Art and the Re-Presentation of the Past," *Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, (2000): 35-62.

[20] Colin Renfrew, *Figuring it Out: Where are we? Where do we come from? The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. The section on Dion finds an antecedent in Renfrew's contribution to the artist's catalogue. See Colin Renfrew, "It May Be Art But Is It Archaeology? Science as Art and Art as Science," *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, eds. Alex Coles and Mark Dion, European Union: Black Dog Publishing, 1999, 12-23.

[21] As a matter of fact, Renfrew does not mention the pioneering work of Shanks and Pearson. Although *Theatre/Archaeology* may have not yet been available for Renfrew's consultation, its genealogy was and leads one to wonder why he ignored it.

Chris Witmore and Cornelius Holtorf complete the list of scholars who address the connection between contemporary art and archaeology.[22] Witmore explores the mediation of the embodied experience of both fields through the work of Richard Long and Janet Cardiff. He also experiments with media to test empirically the specifics of his argument.[23] Holtorf in turn critically discusses the "paradigm of clues" ("traces that are taken to be clues for the events that caused them") to interpret the past.[24] He focuses on the work of German artists who either exhibited at the 1974 show titled *Spurensicherung* or that can be associated with its theme, as well as the work of Mark Dion, and Anne and Patrick Poirier. Additionally, Holtorf has conducted experimental projects in collaboration with artists involving the incavation, excavation and exhibition of material fragments.[25] In the process, he raised conceptual connections with the work of Robert Smithson, Raymond Waydelich and Claes Oldenburg, without developing them further.

The groundbreaking aspect of the work of Shanks and those who followed lies in the very *possibility* of finding connections between contemporary art and archaeology. From an *art historical* perspective, however, the treatment of the artworks and the connections themselves remain largely underdeveloped. While my present research builds on this tradition I also attempt to overcome its major shortcoming. First, I seek to provide a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between both fields by focusing exclusively on

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[22] I am strictly referring to contributions that have been published. Shanks maintains a weblog where he routinely adds insightful comments that relate contemporary artwork and archaeological practice, http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/weblog (accessed February 14, 2005).

[23] Chris Witmore, "Mediating Embodiment through Peripatetic Video: An Experiment in the Corporeality of Place," paper presented at the Fifth World Archaeological Congress, Washington DC, June 21-26, 2003.

[24] See Cornelius Holtorf, "Chapter 4: Interpreting Traces," *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, forthcoming; and "Archäologie als Spurensicherung," *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, eds. Knut Ebeling and Stefan Altekamp, Frankfurt: Fisher, 2004, 306-324.

[25] Cornelius Holtorf, "Incavation-Excavation-Exhibition," *Material Engagements: Studies in Honor of Colin Renfrew*, eds. Neil Brodie and Catherine Hills, McDonald Institute Monographs, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2004, 45-53.

specific works of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson. Moreover, in the chapters devoted to each artist, I will pay as much attention to the artworks themselves (what archaeologists have done so far) as to their social contexts of production, circulation and reception. This latter aspect leads me to the second focal point of my research and the object of the present chapter, which is to contextualize the relationship between contemporary art and archaeology itself.

Why the need to place the relationship between both fields into historical perspective? Within the history of archaeological thought all the above-mentioned archaeologists dealing with the subject of contemporary art can be described as postprocessualists.[26] Although they exercise the ability to look at themselves as the products of a distinct time—one of the unifying beliefs of postprocessualism—they have failed to locate their own relationship to the visual arts within that historical and theoretical moment. Writing on the work of Fred Wilson, art historian and archaeologist Irene Winter is, perhaps, the only one to address the gravity of the issue.[27] She briefly traced the trajectory of debates in the field of archaeology noting that it is "no accident" that such an itinerary also maps the one in the visual arts. To Winter, "what is to be redeemed thereby is not only the legitimate seeking of structures, but also *the theoretical possibility that an historical moment can be marked by patterns* to be found in (some) artistic and in (some) intellectual practices."[28]

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[26] In Renfrew's case, Shanks wonders whether his turn to the visual arts means that he is now a postprocessualist: "A comment for the archaeological theorists among us - is Colin now a post-processualist? There is none of the processual fascination with the interplay of environment, social rank, resource allocation, trade and exchange here. And I notice he is now talking about cognitive archaeology rather than cognitive-processual." Shanks, *Weblog*, http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/weblog/index.php?cat=4 (Accessed February 14, 2005).

[27] Irene J. Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit: Archaeology, Value, History in the Work of Fred Wilson," *New Histories*, eds. Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996, 181-90.

[28] Ibid., 183-4. Emphasis mine.

The issues I tackle in the following pages are a direct response to Winter's claim: What are the historical circumstances that enabled the transition from modernist to "contemporary" art? What are the historical circumstances that allowed these archaeologists to formulate that relationship? What does it mean to be postprocessual? Why are contemporary artworks so suitable to the comparison? What are the theoretical underpinnings behind each practice? If contemporary artwork can be loosely defined as "contemporary" since the 1960s, why didn't archaeologists turn to it until the 1990s? Since a research design comprises the plan to undertake in an archaeological investigation, the goal of this chapter is twofold: to map the patterns within archaeological thought and artistic practice that have guided the nexus between the two, and to provide a basic context and vocabulary to draw upon and refine in the artist-focused chapters.

Setting the Historical Context

From American Modernism to Contemporary Art: Art as an Expanded Field

Barbara Haskell describes the period 1958-1964 in the United States as an "explosion" of a non-existential rhetoric in art.[29] She refers to the early efforts to test the limits of art as it was defined since the 1940s when the United States emerged as an alternative power to the politically and culturally weakened European nations. Following World War II a group of New York artists built on European Surrealism to create their own aesthetic proposal known as Abstract Expressionism or the New York School. As a common denominator, they chose to communicate subjective feeling and emotion, producing an art of "density and silence."[30]

[29] Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance1958-1964*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984.
[30] Lawrence Alloway, *Topics in American Art Since 1945*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1975, 36.

Although politically there were no overt indications of American world supremacy, Serge Gilbaut notes that Abstract Expressionism itself acted as a political tool during the Cold War years.[31] He writes: "the unprecedented national and international success of an American Avant Garde was due not solely to aesthetic and stylistic considerations, but also, even more, to the movement's ideological resonance."[32] Indeed, in 1948 art critic Clement Greenberg proclaimed Abstract Expressionism the foremost artistic expression in Western culture.[33] Due to its sense of originality it also became known as American modernism or American Avant Garde.[34] Greenberg was a formalist who believed in the material conditions—paint on a flat surface, rather than in the representational function of painting. He judged the quality of art according to those parameters, which by themselves and regardless of context, conferred aesthetic merit to the work of art.

In Greenberg's eyes, the autonomy of art not only granted its supreme quality but it enabled the artworks to spark the same response from every spectator. Consequently, taste became objective having nothing to do with matters of preference or self-interest.
As an abstract entity, Abstract Expressionist art epitomized high culture, fine art and good taste as opposed to popular culture or "kitsch," deemed lightweight and insignificant. Embodying universal truth and individuality the movement helped to build the myth of the

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[31] Serge Gilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
[32] Ibid., 2.
[33] Clement Greenberg, "The Decline of Cubism" [1948], *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, 570.
[34] The debate on the meaning and usages of the term modernism and its variations constitutes an entire field of discussion in its own right, which I will not engage in this dissertation. In archaeological theory the term modernity is usually used to address the historical period of novelty based on the Enlightenment's principles. For unifying purposes I will maintain that nomenclature. I will in turn use the term "modernism" in reference to "aesthetic modernism," the artistic tendency within the former historical period that developed in Europe at the end of the nineteenth-century and took a different spin in the 1950s with Greenberg's proposal. Additionally, I use the term modernist in direct reference to the aesthetic usage. For further discussion on the subject see Charles Harrison, "Modernism," *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 142-155.

United States as an apolitical and free nation. However, in the process of portraying Abstract Expressionism as the uncontested origin of American art's future, Greenberg relied on modernity's values of reason, progress and truth. So, while claiming originality and therefore separating itself from former traditions, American modernism proved not to be exactly new.[35]

The American artistic experiments of the late 1950s and early 1960s that counteracted Greenberg's modernist premises soon crystallized as Pop, Minimalism and Performance. Pop art found its source in mass produced popular culture and thus implied the instant identification of the consumer with the new art. According to Lawrence Alloway:

> what seems to be implicit here [in Pop art] is an anthropological description of our own society. Anthropologists define culture as all of a society. This is a drastic foreshortening of a very complex issue in anthropology, but to those of us brought up on narrow and reductive theories of art [aesthetic modernism], anthropology offers a formulation about art as being more than a treasury of precious items. It was a two-way process: the mass media entered the work of art, and the whole environment was regarded, reciprocally, by the artists as art, too.[36]

Pop art helped to democratize art by welcoming into the realm of the fine arts what Greenberg had recently deemed kitsch. Art was no longer a separate entity; it was an art of and about everyday life. Building on Duchamp's ready-mades of the 1910s, artists selected and recontextualized signs and sign-systems. Alloway points out how Pop art can be ironic, but not humorous underscoring the movement's playful critique of modernist art as self-evident category by revealing its inherent state of doubt and ambiguity.[37]

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[35] For an expanded version of this idea see Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity, An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle: Bay Press, 11.
[36] Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art*, New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1974, 7.
[37] Alloway, Ibid.

Minimalism stressed the use of repetitive arrays of abstract forms to isolate the internal relationships, or "objectness," of the artwork. Artist Donald Judd advocated for the simplicity of forms when, in 1965, he wrote that "a work needs only to be interesting."[38] Such a remark contested Greenberg's definition of art, but from a different direction than Pop's critique. Minimalism marked the birth of the viewer, as it demanded an effort to recognize the object-like (non-art) quality of the artwork that was mostly three-dimensional. By the end of the 1960s, minimalist artists, such as Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria, were producing earth works that challenged the viewer's experience.[39] Because most land art was produced in places other than the gallery space, it forced the relocation of the spectator. Earth works, and site-specific art in general, not only incorporated non-traditional media, but also questioned the documentation, and exhibition, as well as the experience of the work itself. Such a "theatricality" of the artwork, as Michael Fried characterized the temporal duration of its physical experience, was also developed by artists themselves through Performance art.[40] The representation of series of ordinary actions introduced a new outlet for artistic expression that challenged the separation between art and life. By drawing attention to "insignificant" phenomena, artists made the audience synonymous with performers. Moreover, the documentation of these ephemeral events became crucial to illuminate the primacy of the artistic process over the end product itself.

In a rather intuitive and certainly independent manner, artists embarked on a critique of modernist art resonant with the major underpinnings of French poststructural thought,

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[38] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" [1965], *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, 813.

[39] The first earth work exhibition took place in 1969 at Cornell University's art gallery. Most pieces were photographs of the actual site-specific works.

[40] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" [1967], *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, 822-34.

which did not permeate American critical thinking until the late 1970s. Only then did artists and art critics/historians begin to acknowledge the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes to elaborate retrospectively on the trends described above as examples of postmodern principles. Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and Benjamin Buchloh are some of the October group's theorists who were especially critical to articulating how art was no longer a variation on the same (modern) theme, but a variation *of* the theme itself.[41]

What was at stake in the dialogue was the idea of a "true" art done in a "right" manner by certain people, as the result of "progress" in taste. To Krauss the new or "contemporary" understanding of sculpture shifted to an expanded field in which there are differently structured possibilities "not defined by a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium - photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors or sculpture itself- might be used."[42] The set of cultural terms referred to by Krauss represented an expanded definition of culture itself, which not only welcomed new media, but also gave voice to groups previously marginalized from the realm of the visual arts due to their race and gender. Additionally, the new art comprised a shift from objects to subjects of aesthetic representation.

Colin Trodd identifies text-based practices that examine the institutional machinery of the art world; and appropriation art that contests the unity and uniqueness of the art object, as the main strategies that both artists and critics employ to reject the Greenbergian model of

[41] See for example, *October: The First Decade*, eds. Annette Michelson, Rosalind E. Kraus, Douglas Crimp and Joan Copjer, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.
[42] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8, (1979): 31-44.

modernism.[43] However, Trodd's ability to isolate specific artistic strategies is indicative of their crystallization throughout the last thirty years. The possibility to chart the expanded field of art inevitably poses the question of whether it itself turned into a fixed category: the category of the unfixed. In other words, if modernity co-opted aesthetic modernism at the turn of the century and in the 1950s, can't the same be said for art that seeks to move away from its forerunners?

The current debate on the novelty of contemporary art points to a time of serious problematization of the structures in the edifice of art and its theorization. Questioning the manner in which art production has been, and still is, enframed by art history throughout time is one of the period's main contributions. This growing awareness on the part of both artists and art historians poses new challenges into the theoretical landscape of the study of art and its practice. Efforts such as Donald Preziosi's "pressing need to think art history *otherwise*, ... [which] reflects an attempt to stand apart from the discipline at an oblique and raking angle" prevent scholars from looking at artists and themselves as if they lived in a social vacuum.[44]

From Processual to Postprocessual Archaeology

As the early 1960s were years of upheaval for the visual arts, so were the early 1980s for archaeological thought. The discipline developed a revisionist line of reasoning that originated with special force in England. Ian Hodder and a group of his students at Cambridge, including Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, published *Symbolic and*

[43] Colin Trodd, "Postmodernism and Art," *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim, New York: Routledge, 1999, 92.
[44] Donald Preziosi, "The Art of Art History," *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Donald Preziosi (ed.), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 508.

Structural Archaeology.[45] The book summarized an increasing discontent with the principles of that which went before, processual or New Archaeology. Briefly, these "post"-processual archaeologists opposed the idea that the New Archaeology was the only valid way to study the past.

American archaeologist Lewis Binford systematized and epitomized the postulates of the New Archaeology, which arose in the United States in the 1960s and solidified in the 1970s.[46] Succinctly, the paradigm represented a dramatic effort to move the discipline away from its former and "old" culture-historical approach. The "new" direction emphasized social and cultural *process* in the past. Although processualist archaeologists took numerous paths, many of them still in vogue today, they all believe in the objectivity of science.[47] With a strong emphasis on positivism the New Archaeology attempted to place an epistemology of absolute truth at the center of archaeological practice by turning it into a methodology. The use of empirical data seemed sufficient to verify hypothetical propositions about the past with the implied assumption that they were objective, singular, quantifiable, and universal.

Although culture meant process, it also meant a self-contained process reactive to external constraints and divorced from human volition. Theoretically, the New Archaeology recognized an ideological component shaping the archaeological record, but in the practice studies focused on issues of technology and subsistence patterns that provided tangible and more reliable evidence easier to verify quantitatively. New Archaeology placed science in

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[45] Ian Hodder, ed., *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
[46] See Lewis R. Binford "Archaeology as Anthropology," *American Antiquity* 28, (1962): 217-25 and "Archaeological Systematics and the Study of Culture Process," *American Antiquity* 31, (1965): 203-10. For a profile of Lewis Binford see Paula L. W. Sabloff, *Conversations with Lew Binford: Drafting the New Archaeology*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.
[47] For an example of the range of New Archaeology research at the time it consolidated, see Mark Leone's edited volume *Contemporary Archaeology: A Guide to Theory and Contributions*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, London and Amsterdam: Feffer Simons, Inc., 1972.

opposition to history favoring regularities over differences as well as long-term crosscultural generalizations over specific traditions. But New Archaeologists repudiated only the particular and synchronic aspect of history; they themselves operated as the grand producers of an official history, ethic neutrality, and diachronic cultural change.

As Bruce Trigger notes, New Archaeology's rejection of national traditions represented "an ideological reflection of the increasing economic and political interventionism of the United States on a global scale after World War II."[48] This line of reasoning matches Gilbaut's interpretation of Abstract Expressionism as an ideological tool of domination and Trigger, in fact, notes such correlation.[49] After World War II, the United States theoretically grew apart from Europe. Anthropologists Leslie White, Julian Steward, and Marvin Harris emphasized technological, ecological, and economic matters as key elements to determining cultural change and, ultimately, American world supremacy.[50] Neo-evolutionism provided the platform for Binford and New Archaeologists to support their own approach to study the past. Both art and archaeology, therefore, seemed to take advantage of the same historic political landscape to promote the values of modernity under the mask of "Avant-Garde" and "New" paradigms, respectively. Neither discipline, however, proposed anything really innovative, just theoretical and methodological variations on modernity's traditional values of reason, truth, progress, and objectivity.

In broad terms, Lewis Binford is to archaeology what Clement Greenberg is to art, although they did not overlap historically. Greenbergian Abstract Expressionism was

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[48] Bruce Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 314.
[49] Ibid, 315.
[50] Both Steward and White relied greatly on Marxist materialism, but given the anticommunist political climate of the time in the United States, they refrained from citing Marxian literature in their work. For further details on the controversies caused by each scholar's ideological standing see R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, California, London, and Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000, and W. J. Peace, "Bernhard Stern, Leslie A, White, and an Anthropological Appraisal of the Russian Revolution," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 100, nº1, (1998): 84-93.

beginning to decline, when Binford's New Archaeology was taking off and would last significantly longer. However, on a superficial level, both theorists share the dogmatic manner in which they put forth their ideas. That, along with their personal charisma, made them targets of theoretical and visual caricature. Consider the cartoon titled *The Anatomy Lecture* that appears at the beginning of Hodder's 1982 "manifesto" (Fig. 3). The scene takes place in the surgical amphitheater of Southampton General. Students sit and look at Binford giving medical treatment to Hodder in the hopes of restoring his unruly behavior. Analogically, Mark Tansey's mock-history painting *Triumph of the New York School*, 1984, depicts European artists admitting defeat to Americans with the consequent transfer of power from Paris to New York as the world's art center (Fig. 4). Greenberg takes the focal point of the composition receiving the surrender.

Although twenty years apart, these two mythic events invite dialogue pointing to an entire complex of historical reference and reflection in the relationship between contemporary art and archaeological practice. Whereas to Greenberg art was apart from and above ordinary life, Binford separated the cause of cultural change from human daily volition to rely exclusively on external forces. While modernist art claimed to have universal meaning, processualists built the past on broad generalizations; both art and the past were placed outside of history. Greenberg's differentiated "Fine Art" (painting) from "Low Art" (craft, kitsch), Binford in turn distinguished scientific archaeological evidence (quantitative; technology, settlement patterns, ecology) from non-scientific archaeological evidence (qualitative; cognition). Moreover, both Abstract Expressionism and the New Archaeology share an obsession with breaking with tradition, but most significantly, they both endorse a

rigid and univocal interpretation of art and the past. As it happened with Abstract Expressionism, American New Archaeology proved to be as "old" as its forerunner.

By contrast, the postprocessual turn in archaeology meant a shift from an omnipresent to a self-reflexive subject. Archaeologists became conscious of their power as interpreters of that past. Bapty and Yates see identity, writing, and materiality/textuality as the main themes of interest that guide postprocessual inquiry.[51] Identity refers to deconstructing the idea of context, that is to say, to frame not only the past context under study, but also the present context from which the archaeologist is undertaking his/her interpretive endeavor. Writing alludes to the agency of the archaeologist, since "reading" the past can also be viewed as a form of writing or supplement to the original text. The archaeologist is *making* rather than merely finding knowledge. Finally, the theme of materiality/textuality brings issues of identity and context together through the scholar's own writing as long as it is viewed as material culture itself.

Identity, writing and materiality/textuality are the critical issues that postprocessual archaeology puts forward, but they too are the main topics of the cultural debate at large. As in the realm of the visual arts, postructuralist theories have largely influenced postprocessual archaeology. The decade following Hodder and his students "manifesto" provides ample evidence of archaeology's emphasis on French theories, mostly that of Foucault and Derrida. However, several other theoretical approaches affect each scholar's writing about the past. From that viewpoint, postprocessual archaeology lacks a unitary project and many authors refer to it in the plural (postprocessual *archaeologies*) or as either "interpretive" or

[51] Ian Bapty and Tim Yates, "Introduction," *Archaeology After Structuralism: Post-Structuralism and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. Ian Bapty and Tim Yates, London: Routledge, 1990, 1-32.

"reflexive" archaeology to convey its spirit.[52] Ironically, the main criticism of postprocessual archaeology is precisely the lack of a unifying methodology to apply its strong theoretical proposal.[53] Consequently, any attempt to standardize such an eclectic endeavor is very "processual" in nature since it aborts the existence of diversity. Thomas emphatically asserts "if there is no one definitive knowledge of the past, no single methodology can reveal it to us."[54]

Although Thomas's statement seems logical, it evades a major pitfall of current archaeological debate. Regardless of the futility of developing a single method, there needs to be a stronger dialogue between theory and (archaeological) practice. Even flagrant postprocessual archaeologists, such as Michael Shanks, have criticized archaeology's split between "theoreticism" and practice after the postprocessual turn.[55] This inability to customize and to apply poststructural concerns in concrete (and diverse) ways may stem from another major critique of postprocessual archaeology: its tendency towards skepticism and hyperrelativism. The acute self-reflexivity upon the discipline could reach extreme positions, such as a denial to deal with the past at all. But being aware of subjectivity does not make radical archaeologists less embedded in our late capitalist society, and therefore pretending to escape its logic seems naïve. As Thomas argues, "our ways of thinking about

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[52] For an example of the range in postprocessual research see *Interpretive Archaeology: A Reader*, ed. Julian Thomas (ed.), London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000.

[53] See for example Ian Bapty and Tim Yates, eds., *Archaeology After Structuralism: Post-Structuralism and the Practice of Archaeology*, London: Routledge, 1990.

[54] Thomas, *Interpretive Archaeology*, 3. The lack of a single methodology does not mean that postprocessual archaeologists are not careful about studying the past, or that "anything goes" when it comes to its interpretation. Tilley offers a good discussion on this topic in "Materialism and an Archaeology of Dissonance," *Interpretive Archaeology*, ed. Thomas, 71-80.

[55] Michael Shanks, "Conclusion: Reading the Signs: Responses to *Archaeology After Structuralism,*" *Archaeology After Structuralism*, eds. Bapty and Yates, 294-310.

the past and about material things remain distinctively modern."[56] This should not mean that archaeologists must cease to practice archaeology; on the contrary, it means that archaeologists, aware of their circumstance (historical and ideological) as mediators with the past, can help to construct the field instead of merely to deconstruct it. I thus agree with Shanks in his hope for a "positive reading of possibility" wherein the ills of modernity are exposed to contend with them.[57] From this perspective, archaeology will remain modernity's invention, but its condition will no longer be a mystery.

Hodder considers postprocessual archaeology as an "era" rather than a movement.[58] But if we are indeed the product of our time, why was postprocessual archaeology first adopted, at least in a more intense way, in Britain rather than in the United States? To Mark Leone, the relation of each country with its own past is critical.[59] White Americans' detachment from prehistoric American Indians led them to view the past as something dead and thus easy to dissect with cold objectivity and verifiable tests. The British, by contrast, used the awareness of their heritage to view the past as socially constructed by people like themselves. Leone argues that each perspective reflects a different use—processual and postprocessual, respectively—of materialism as long as, one way or the other, they both emphasize the weight of the present in the production of meaning about the past. Although each country developed both kinds of archaeological reasoning at some point, Leone's argument makes sense in terms of understanding the origins and popularity of each.

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[56] Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 4. In this book Thomas provides an extended analysis of archaeology's modern condition.
[57] Shanks, "Conclusion: Reading the Signs," 310. See also Christopher Tilley, "On Modernity and Archaeological Discourse," *Archaeology After Structuralism*, eds. Bapty and Yates, 128-152.
[58] Ian Hodder, "Interpretive Archaeology and its Role," *American Antiquity*, vol. 56, nº1, (1991): 7-18.
[59] Mark Leone, "Childe's Offspring," *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, ed. Hodder, 179-84.

Despite the influence of British archaeologists' continuity with their past, it took them almost twenty years more than visual artists to become critical of the pervasiveness of modernity's values. Archaeology's scientific status may have played a role here. Theories challenging the principles of modernity sprang from French circles within the humanities (e.g. philosophy, literature, history). At that time, the strong presence of the New Archaeology led archaeologists to inform their work with sources from, or very close to, the natural sciences because they wanted to become an exact science as well. In the 1970s, Binford was reading Françoise Bordes not Roland Barthes.[60] Interestingly, the shift to poststructuralist sources took place almost concurrently and with the same force in American *cultural anthropology* as in British archaeology.[61]

In the 1970s, American anthropologists had already developed symbolic and interpretive approaches to the study of man and culture; adding Foucault and Derrida did not affect a major change of focus.[62] Additionally, anthropologists were dealing with the present, which in keeping with Leone's ideas, must have favored the ethnographer's identification with his/her object of study and thus their relationship. In this respect, the scientific pressure to produce verifiable laws was not an issue to visual artists as it was to social scientists, especially American archaeologists. Artists were free to experiment with new definitions of art, but that experimentation was a metaphoric deconstruction of structural modernist principles associated with science. They were not deconstructing science itself as anthropologists and archaeologists would. Furthermore, early experimentation in the

[60] Sabloff, *Conversations with Lew Binford*, 18-19.
[61] During the early 1980s, anthropologists fully acknowledged the postulates of literary criticism and poststructuralism, especially theories that challenged the existence of grand narratives or absolute and objective truths. One of the first publications to address such a crisis is the edited volume by James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986.
[62] See for example, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

American visual arts was not necessarily informed by French theorists; it occurred, steadily, in its own right.

Once again, one can identify a constant dialogue between the visual arts and the trajectory of archaeological debate. The postmodern version of the Binford/Greenberg match of theorists, would be Cambridge (Hodder and students)/the October group (Krauss et al.) for their groundbreaking role in each discipline. In a general sense, Cambridge views the past embedded in the present, while October recognizes art as not separated from life. To Cambridge the sociocultural context of the archaeologist defines the past, while to the October group art is defined by its own (the artist's) sociocultural contexts. While Cambridge believes that no theory is superior to interpret the past, the October group believes that no material is superior in status to another. Cambridge archaeologists mix theories and analogies from past and present, whereas contemporary artists and critics appropriate images from the past and mass culture. Finally, both Cambridge archaeologists and the October group/contemporary artists see the past and artworks, respectively, as open, with many possible readings.

If we are to accept archaeology's postprocessual condition, it raises the same question of novelty that contemporary art does. After two decades of self-critique, the diversification and institutionalization of postprocessual archaeology deemed it another category of archaeological theory and practice. And that is inevitable. Despite and because of its emphasis on diverse ways to know the past, postprocessual archaeology fills a new definition of archaeology. Although this definition locates the production of such knowledge (of the past) in the here and now, it does not abandon the discipline's origin. Thus, Preziosi's need

to think about art history, and thereby art, from an oblique angle, goes hand in hand with Shanks's positive reading of possibility.

Art (History) Looks at Archaeology

The Methodological Problem

In a general sense, both contemporary art and postprocessual archaeology reacted to narrow categories to define each field. The underlying critique invites dialogue between the two practices; as much as they deal with similar issues they tackle them from their unique specificity. Thus, sympathizing with postprocessualist theory does not guarantee that archaeologists will address contemporary artworks as legitimate sources of theoretical discussion. Nor does it mean that artists will explicitly draw upon postprocessual archaeologies as a source of inspiration. As discussed in the introduction, leading postprocessualist theorists, including Hodder, still treat contemporary artwork decoratively, as mere illustrations of their more serious discussion. Likewise, most artists are not even aware of the current theoretical debate within archaeological circles.

While some archaeologists look at art and formulate compelling relationships between the two fields, they have refrained from developing them further. The extent of archaeological, and especially *anthropological* self-critique, barely reached the realm of artistic subject matters and its creators. Although interested in the present, almost all anthropologists' efforts to formulate an "anthropology of art," as a theoretical and methodological body of information, are still based on the "decorative arts" of small-scale

societies.[63] That may be the difficulty for archaeologists to find a way beyond identifying structural connections between contemporary artwork and their professional practice.

Art historical scholarship presents similar problems. For over a century the myth of primitivism dominated the field revealing the difficulty of both artists and art historians to view archaeology as a social practice divorced from its object of study. The myth dates to the time of colonialism when European states deemed both the non-Western colonized and their material culture "primitive." Concurrently, in the 1880s, anthropology gained scientific recognition entering the curricula of British higher education with archaeology being one of its subfields. Not only did anthropology and archaeology focus on the study of people and artifacts from the colonies, but they also supported evolutionary interpretations that confirmed their primitivism. Although both fields abandoned those theories long ago, artists and art historians continued to associate them with one another. As a consequence, they equated anthropological art with the material culture of primitive non-Western people (its "exclusive" object of study) or, with Western artworks that resembled primitive aesthetics. Modernists championed this approach in the 1920s and 1930s, but the now famous *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* show at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1984, confirmed its currency.[64]

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[63] See for example Robert Layton, *The Anthropology of Art*, London, Toronto, Sidney, and New York: Granada Publishing, 1981; Evelyn Payne Hatcher, *Art as Culture: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Art*, Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1985. For research on an anthropology of the art market see George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, "The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction," 1-51, and George E. Marcus, "The Power of Contemporary Work in an American Art Tradition to Illuminate Its Own Power Relations," 201-23, both in *The Traffic in Art and Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, eds., George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995.

[64] For proponents of the myth of primitivism see Robert Goldwater, *Primitivisim in Modern Art*, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986 [1938] and William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2 vols. 1984. For critiques of the primitivism myth see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988; Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage,* Berkeley,

In the mid 1990s Hal Foster offered an alternative view largely due to anthropology's revisionist turn of the former decade. He recognized that the wide variety of artistic investigations from the last thirty-five years constitute a series of shifts in the siting of art. Artists play the role of ethnographers mapping contemporary institutions and communities.[65] Foster was cautious, nonetheless, when naming most of such art "quasi-anthropological" since the participant-observation carried out by some of those artists is opportunistic rather than critical. And he is correct, whenever artists assume both roles of native informant and ethnographer, they often maintain the dynamics of ideological patronage shared by their modernist predecessors. However, Foster's rationale conforms to that same logic of ideological patronage, as I will argue shortly.

Turning back to anthropology, one might reconsider the work of Alfred Gell. Although the scholar limited the application of his "anthropological theory of art" to the artworks of non-Western small-scale societies, it also provides a model for recent Western art.[66] Gell addressed the fact that anthropology (and by default archaeology) is a social science and not a discipline of the humanities. As such, "an anthropology of art focuses on the social context of art production, circulation, and reception, rather than the evaluation of particular works of art."[67] The subject matter of anthropology is thus social relationships,

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Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998; Susan Hiller, "Art and Anthropology/Anthropology and Art," *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996, 16-25; Rasheed Araeen, "From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts," *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 158-82.

[65] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996, 171-203.

[66] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropology of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, which was published a year after his untimely death. In earlier work he touched tangentially upon the Western artwork of John F. Peto in "The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology," *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, eds. James Coote and Anthony Shelton, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 40-67; as well as in the work of Damian Hirst and Marcel Duchamp in "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps," *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 1, nº1, (1996): 15-38.

[67] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 3.

and if something is to be theorized regarding artistic practices it is "the mobilization of aesthetic principles (or something like them) in the course of social interaction."[68] In other words, Gell advocates the treatment of the anthropological work of art as a social agent within a context of action composed by intention, causation, results, and transformation. Furthermore, Gell's anthropological definition of an art object is merely theoretical since "the art object is whatever is inserted into the 'slot' provided for art objects in the system of terms and relations envisaged in the [scholar's] theory."[69]

Gell's concern for an artwork's context shares the driving principle of the Marxist approach to art history known as the social history of art, as well as the wing of material culture studies dealing with visual aspects of culture.[70] Although both "schools" basically treat the work of art in the same manner that Gell suggests, none of them acknowledges its anthropological quality except, to a certain degree, Foster.[71] What could be a mere rhetorical mismatch leads one to wonder what lies behind refraining from using the term "anthropological" to describe the nature of contemporary artworks. Apparently, the term still carries along that which Gell rejects: its reduction to a distant ethnographic other deemed a producer of "art."[72] From that perspective, most contemporary art practice (the non-ethnographic one) is incompatible with anthropology.

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[68] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 4.
[69] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 7.
[70] The social history of art can be traced back to the 1930s as evidenced in the work of Arnold Hauser and other socialist art historians. In the late 1970s, it was associated with scholars who adhered to the *October* group such as Hal Foster, Rosalind Krausss, and Craig Owens. Material culture studies scholarship related to the visual arts find a prime example in the work of Jules Prown, who writes about the discipline's theory and methodology in "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988, 17-37.
[71] When talking about the artist as ethnographer, Foster is really addressing the way in which the artist operates instead of the nature of his/her work itself. Moreover, to paraphrase Foster, anthropological art should be constituted by the artwork of artists who successfully act like ethnographers, leaving all other artists who do not act in such a way outside.
[72] Gell, "Vogel's Net," 34-7.

Gell's liberating contribution to the salvage of the relationship between art and anthropology lies not only in his rejection of the European aesthetic notion of artworks, but also in his ability to build an alternative from the ruins of the primitivist myth. For scholars after Gell, anthropological art embodies meaningful artworks, which are the residues of complex intentions. Foster's "quasi-anthropological" art therefore appears as a contradiction in terms. By considering some artists' work "quasi-anthropological" due to their failure to operate as self-aware ethnographers, Foster obliterates the meaning and complex (un)intentionality of such a failure. In other words, there cannot be "quasi-anthropological" art since art will always be anthropological as long as it remains meaningful. The fact that Foster equates the work of some contemporary artists with a narrow notion of anthropological (ethnographic) practice unfolds as a verbal coincidence that brings him closer to modernist approaches to the subject.[73]

In sum, Gell's theory of anthropological art provides an interface that gives equally ample definitions to both art and anthropology/archaeology. Under this framework, one can consider artworks for their anthropological value, and thus pertaining to anthropology's sphere of interest, even if artists do not intend them to be "anthropological" and regardless of how they define anthropology in case they do so. This model also enables the understanding of archaeology as a social practice with no fixed connections to a particular object of study. Moreover, the emphasis on the social relations in which each practice is embedded underscores the notion of process over results of both archaeological and artistic practices. The specificity of each web of social relations ensures the assessment of contextual information and the possibility of finding meaning that is historically constituted.

[73] Jennifer González arrives at a similar conclusion in her dissertation "Siting Histories: Material Culture and the Politics of Display in the Work of Fred Wilson, Pepon Osorio, and Amalia Mesa-Bains," University of California, Santa Cruz, 1996, 426-7.

The Archaeological Process in the Work of Smithson, Dion, and Wilson

A great deal of art historical scholarship treats the work of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson anthropologically, that is to say, as the meaningful residues of complex sets of social relations. However, scholars rarely define the artwork or the approach as such, nor do they set the artwork against archaeological practice to guide the analysis. When they do so, they often respond to the artists' literalism in setting such a parallel.

Smithson, Dion, and Wilson represent archaeology as amateurs, not because they purposely want to misrepresent the discipline, but because they propose a more general cultural critique that *resonates* with specific issues within archaeological practice. They question the possibility of constructing official histories. Although they acknowledge the implications stemming from their critical work, these artists have no control over the extent or specificity of that commentary. Since they sometimes use literal references to archaeology as a proxy for further reflection, archaeologists may appropriate the critique and read it in terms of their disciplinary experience. But one should not expect artists themselves to apprehend those nuances. Whether archaeologists (or others) identify or not with the artists' general critique, the connection depends on their own ability to read such a connection metaphorically.

From this perspective, artwork that does not dwell on archaeological literalism to prompt further reflection can too stimulate metaphoric readings from archaeology. Why, then, have I chosen that of Smithson, Dion and Wilson for this research? First, the three artists come from different generations and backgrounds, revealing the "texture" within contemporary art practice, which is by no means a monolithic period. Second, in differing degrees, their work combines both literal and metaphorical references to archaeology,

facilitating the formulation of the latter. But most importantly, the metaphorical reference resonates *specifically* with the discipline's *postprocessual* turn.[74] Because Smithson died prematurely in a plane accident in 1973, prior to the birth of postprocessual archaeology, the resonance of his critique and that of the archaeological paradigm is especially compelling.

Although Smithson was interested in prehistory he rarely made explicit references to archaeology. Most of his work addresses the very distant past (prior to humankind) or the very recent one (industrial sites), which he did not characterize as archaeological. Until the early 1980s, almost all scholarship interpreted Smithson's pioneering out-of-doors experience as a reference to the "primitive" nature of his "romantic" and "transcendentalist" attitudes toward the landscape, particularly through his 1970 "masterwork," *Spiral Jetty*.[75] In 1978, art historian Craig Owens took a new look at the *Jetty* and for the first time paid as much—if not more—attention to Smithson's artistic *process* as to his final product.[76] Owens informed his analysis with structural and poststructural theories as well as by a deeper exploration and evaluation of the artist's writings.[77] He recognized Smithson's own intuitive use of those same postmodern ideas throughout his work.[78]

Several scholars followed Owen's theoretical path including Elizabeth Childs, Jessica Prinz, Robert Sobieszek and Gary Shapiro, who additionally moved on to appreciate works

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[74] Under this consideration, works that address archaeological practice may not necessarily invite reflection regarding postprocessual archaeologies.

[75] For the primitivist nature of his work see for example Kirk Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, vol. 2, 661-85.

[76] Craig Owens, "Photography en Abyme," *October* 5, (1978,): 73-88, and "Earthwords," *October* 10, (1979): 121-130.

[77] Smithson's writings were in part published during his lifetime as articles in magazines such as *Artforum*. The posthumous compilation by Jack Flam, however, also includes interviews he held and unpublished material. See Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996.

[78] Owens noticed an extreme similarity between Smithson's ideas and language with poststructuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

other than *Spiral Jetty*.[79] More recently, scholars such as Ronald Graziani, Rebecca Butterfield, Ann Reynolds, and Jennifer Roberts favor historical poststructuralist approaches to understand Smithson as a product of his own time, demonstrating that he was less postmodern than Owens wanted him to be.[80] Although the research of this latter group is highly relevant to archaeology, only Butterfield explicitly sets Smithson's work against archaeological practice identifying the aptness of his work to the postprocessual paradigm. A number of archaeologists have also established conceptual connections between Smithson's sites/nonsites and archaeological practice, without developing them further.[81] My research intends to refine the two latter approaches emphasizing the sources that bring Smithson and postprocessualism together but that also set them apart.

Unlike Smithson's, the work of Mark Dion and Fred Wilson presents significantly less scholarship, remaining to a great extent, in the realm of art criticism. However, because Dion and Wilson are younger than Smithson and built on his visionary conceptual work, scholars have never questioned the younger artists' standing as post-Conceptual "cultural producers."[82] They always pay attention to the process rather than to the final product. Dion and Wilson acknowledge how poststructuralist theorists, such as Foucault (Dion), and James

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[79] Elizabeth Childs, "Robert Smithson and Film: The Spiral Jetty Reconsidered," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 56, nº2, (1981): 68-81; Jessica Prinz, *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, 79-123; Robert Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with University of New Mexico Press, 1993; Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

[80] Ronald Graziani, "(De)Terminating the Political Enframent in the Art by Robert Smithson," Phd diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1992; Rebecca Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past: Archaic References and the Archaeological Paradigm in Contemporary American Earth Art," Phd diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998, 14-83; Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2003; and Jennifer Roberts, *Mirrored Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.

[81] Tilley et al., "Art and the Re-Presentation" and Holtorf, "Incavation-Excavation-Exhibition."

[82] See for example, Foster, *Return of the Real*, 25, and Daniel Birnbaum, "Stream of Conscience: Mark Dion's Tate Thames Dig," *Artforum*, (November 1999): 116-21.

Clifford (Wilson), profoundly influence and/or confirm their artwork.[83] From this viewpoint, art historians, such as Lisa G. Corrin, Hal Foster, Miwon Kwon, Irene Winter, and Jennifer González, evaluate the work of both artists according to their ability or inability to convey the deconstructive discourse they overtly promote.[84]

Foster is the only one to express major reservations about the feasibility of Wilson's and Dion's deconstructive-"ethnographic" approach to museums. According to Foster, both artists' collaborative institutional projects where they perform their critique could at the same time become hermetic, elitist, and cynical.[85] However, despite Foster's insistence upon deeming Wilson's and Dion's work "quasi-anthropological," the work remains meaningful and in Gell's sense fully anthropological. Moreover, by "failing" to be anthropological, the work of Dion and Wilson materializes "failures" inherent to both anthropology and archaeology. Foster's split between non-anthropological, quasi-anthropological, and fully anthropological artworks lies in his narrow notion of anthropology, exposing his inability to see contradiction within the practice itself.

The primary focus of Dion's institutional critique is the representation of nature.[86] In his "dig" projects, however, he makes explicit references to archaeology, hence the number of professional archaeologists writing on his work. Along with art critics and art historians, the archaeologists focus on the artist's allusion to their discipline in terms of the arbitrariness

[83] See for example, Leslie King-Hammond, "A Conversation with Fred Wilson," *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Lisa G. Corrin, Baltimore: The Contemporary in association with The New Press, 1994, 31; Lisa G. Corrin, "A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderful History of Nature," *Mark Dion*, eds. Lisa G. Corrin, Miwon Kwon and Norman Bryson, London: Phaidon, 1997, 39.
[84] Corrin, "Mark Dion's Project;" Foster, "Return of the Real;" Miwon Kwon, "Unnatural Tendencies: Scientific Guises of Mark Dion," *Natural History and Other Fictions: An Exhibition by Mark Dion*, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1997, 38-43; Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit;" and González, "Siting Histories."
[85] Foster, *Return of the Real*, 196-198; see also Corrin, "A Natural History," p. 84.
[86] For a survey of his work up to 1997, see Corrin, "A Natural History."

of its classificatory processes.[87] They underscore the absurdity of removing objects from one context to another, but obliterate the very strategies that enable him to expose those dynamics. I am not concerned about what part of Dion's work is fake or real, but on the strategies that separate him from real archaeologists and enable the artist to look at the discipline in the way he does.

Fred Wilson's direct allusion to the misrepresentation of the past in history museums generated extensive scholarship contesting the neutrality of curatorial efforts to display culture.[88] Wilson, however, neither defines the historical past as archaeological, nor does he always work in institutions that associate themselves with archaeology. From this perspective, the scholarship covers a more general scope, not addressing the dynamics of archaeology museums or archaeologist-curators specifically. González and Winter have independently raised the issue of archaeological excavation in relation to Wilson's work.[89] The analysis follows Foucault's concept of excavation, which metaphorically deals with broader issues, such as interpretation and representation within the archaeological process. My research follows a similar path, but also evaluates the impact of Wilson's critique and of postprocessual archaeology inside the institution, the museum and the discipline of archaeology, respectively.

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[87] See for example, Alex Coles and Mark Dion, eds, *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, European Union: Black Dog Publishing, 1999; and *Mark Dion: New England Digs*, curated by Denise Markonish, Brockton: Fuller Museum of Art, 2001.

[88] See for example, González, "Siting Histories;" Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson, "Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums," *Thinking About Exhibitions,* eds. Reesa Greenberg; Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 251-267; Patterson Sims, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*, Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993, an exhibition catalogue; and Maurice Berger and Fred Wilson, "Collaboration, Museums, and the Politics of Display: A Conversation with Fred Wilson," *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, ed. Maurice Berger, Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001, 152-65, an exhibition catalogue.

[89] González, "Siting Histories," and Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit."

Given the diversity of ideas within postprocessual archaeology, I will compare the work of Smithson specifically with that of Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley. The archaeologists share a similar philosophical sensibility within the discipline that singles them out from other scholars who sympathize with the postulates of postprocessualism. Moreover, the work of the three artists resonates with the archaeology of Shanks and Tilley although it does not allude to it directly. As a matter of fact, neither Dion nor Wilson knows the archaeologists personally, nor were they familiar with their work when producing the projects under investigation.

Although Shanks and Tilley formulated pioneering conceptual connections between archaeological practice and contemporary artwork, I am not interested in evaluating the kind or range of those connections. Instead, I am interested in the very fact that they formulated them; it reveals a unique way of handling their archaeological practice, which is the main source of connection with the artists' work. Loosely speaking, Shanks and Tilley follow an "interpretive" line of inquiry within postprocessualism. After studying with Hodder at Cambridge, they intellectually grew apart by introducing poststructuralism and critical theory to their analysis. They came to the spotlight with the 1987 publication of *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, where they examine epistemological aspects of the discipline.[90] The book raised considerable criticism due its unconventional proposal.

The work of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson has been only partially compared with archaeological practice, let alone with that of Shanks and Tilley. In the following chapters I will consider every main stage of the archaeological experience in relation to each artist's work. Such a thorough comparison will underscore how artists and

[90] Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Reconstructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987].

archaeologists rethought their fields in the last forty years as well as to what extent, and why, those redefinitions are similar. Furthermore, this dissertation will demonstrate how the groundbreaking work of Smithson in the late 1960s not only was influential for later generations of artists such as Dion and Wilson, but also seemed to anticipate by over ten years many postulates of archaeology's own self-critique.

Chapter 2. Fieldwork:
Robert Smithson

> The frightening problems are the ones that really need investigation.
> Robert Smithson[91]

Introduction

In 1972, Robert Smithson gave a slide lecture on his work *Hotel Palenque* to architecture students at the University of Utah. It consisted of a series of 31 snaphots taken during his 1969 trip to Yucatán with his wife, the artist Nancy Holt, and their friend, the art dealer Virginia Dwan. Given the title of the lecture, the audience probably expected Smithson to address the famous ancient Maya ruins outside the town of Palenque, but instead, he talked and showed images of the partially ruined hotel where the group stayed. Smithson commented on the characteristics of various architectural features of the building, which had the quality of "being both ripped down and built up at the same time."[92]

Regardless of the lecture's focus on contemporary decay and of what the audience may or may have not expected to encounter, it seems that Smithson did want to mislead the public by creating the false expectation of seeing ancient Maya ruins. During the talk the artist stated:

> Now here is one of the more interesting windows in this hotel [Fig. 5] … if you look through…you might remotely be able to pick out a fragment of the Palenque ruins, the temples, the Maya observatories and other wonders that the pre-Spanish Indians built … *But you won't see any of those temples in this lecture I mean that's something that you have to go there to see for yourself* and I hope that you go to Hotel Palenque so that you learn something about how the Mayans are still building.[93]

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[91] Robert Smithson, "Four Conversations between Robert Smithson and Denis Wheeler," edited by Eva Schmidt, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings,* ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 231.
[92] Robert Smithson, "Insert Robert Smithson: Hotel Palenque, 1969-1972," *Parkett* 43 (1995): 120.
[93] Ibid., 119. Emphasis mine.

Smithson was playing with the ambivalence of the term "ruin" and with the associations to the place "Palenque." He stressed that ruins are not necessarily ancient and that the locality Palenque involves more than the Maya archaeological past, underscoring the necessity to travel the distance to have a first-hand experience instead of trusting his words. Smithson sought to upset contemporary cultural conventions through visual disappointment, a common strategy of his, also present in *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, another major project from his trip to Mexico, and one that I discuss in this chapter regarding archaeological fieldwork.

The most evident cultural convention that Smithson challenged with *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* is the work's own materiality.[94] *Incidents* is an essay published in the September 1969 issue of *Artforum* where the artist documents, through text and photographs, a series of installations that he executed in the peninsula (Fig. 6 and Fig.7).[95] The main installation consists of a set of squared mirrors that Smithson placed in nine different locations, photographed, and later removed. The essay is actually divided in nine sections, where he narrates events and thoughts relative to each of the mirror displacements. In addition, the artist documents three other works that were executed on the sites of the second, fifth, and seventh mirror displacements.[96]

The approach to the materiality of *Incidents* can be twofold dependent upon whether one decides to focus on the journal publication itself, or on Smithson's actual practice in the

[94] From now onwards I will refer to the work as *Incidents*.
[95] In the following pages I will quote the essay from its reprint in Smithson, *Writings*, 119-33.
[96] These other works are *Hypothetical Continent of Gondwanaland —Ice Cap, Overturned Rocks (1-6)*, and *Third Upside-Down Tree*. While *Incidents* illustrates each of the nine mirror displacements, the other works alluded in the text are only partially documented with images. There is only one overturned rock with two photographs of its first and second phase. In addition, Smithson executed other works that are not documented in the *Incidents* essay, but have been published in color in Robert Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with University of New Mexico Press, 1993, an exhibition catalog. This is the case of *Hotel Palenque* and *Roots & Rocks, Palenque*.

Yucatán that is, of course, mediated by his own account of those "incidents." Although seemingly different, one cannot exist without the other, at least in the case of the mirror displacements, which are the focus of my analysis. Smithson undoubtedly worked with mirrors in Yucatán, the photographs account for it, but because he dismantled the mirrors right after displacing them, there was no material referent left *in situ*. Unlike the other Yucatán projects—the Palenque hotel, the overturned rocks, the downturned tree, and the earth map, that can be potentially revisited, one can only access the mirror displacements through documents. Smithson's documents.[97]

Although Smithson made both literal and metaphoric references to archaeology, the main target of *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* was the construction of history as an objective entity. Despite Yucatán's scenery, he did not intend to critique the creation of the Maya archaeological past as much as he sought to unveil the power relations embedded in the act of making artistic practice accessible to people. Smithson was commenting on the arbitrary aspects inherent in the construction of (art) history while constructing an arbitrary history of his own work. The disjunction between an action and its documentation is also present in the archaeological fieldwork experience, which I discuss in this chapter.

My comparison between *Incidents* and archaeological fieldwork ultimately deals with the temporal issues embedded in the documentation process. However, I pay special attention to the spatial implications of Smithson's Yucatán project for the practice of archaeologists in the field. I am interested in the process that Smithson undertook from the minute he left New York for Mérida to when he submitted his essay and photographs for publication, as well as in the aftermath of that process. From this perspective, I am not

[97] During Smithson's lifetime, the Yucatan Mirror Displacements were only featured in *Incidents*, which leads one to believe that the artist conceived the photographs of the installations and the text as one entity. Today, the original chromogenic slides of the nine mirror displacements are owned by the Guggenheim Museum.

interested in the literal or metaphoric references to the Maya archaeological past. Rather than archaeology's object of study, I am interested in the way in which archaeologists approach their object of study and how that problematic relationship is indirectly treated by Smithson. *Incidents* complicates further the already arbitrary approach to archaeological sites through surveying, defining, sampling, and locating those places.

Smithson's relation to time and history in *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* has been discussed in depth elsewhere.[98] Independently, Jennifer Roberts and Rebecca Butterfield demonstrate the artist's ambivalent and complex view of the temporal realm. While Roberts centers on Smithson's attitudes toward the landscape and its inhabitants, Butterfield focuses on Smithson's deployment of archaeological and archaic references. Although I ultimately share the conclusions advanced in each analysis, my approach to Smithson's Yucatán project is both different and complementary. I agree with Roberts that Smithson's preoccupation with time and history not only permeates his entire work, but is also inseparable from and indicative of his concern with spatial issues.[99] My focus on the spatial implications of Smithson's project seeks to show the ways in which space is mediated

[98] Rebecca Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past: Archaic References and the Archaeological Paradigm in Contemporary American Earth Art," Phd diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998, 14-83, and Jennifer Roberts, "Mirrored Travels: Robert Smithson and History," Phd diss., Yale University, 2000, 132-200. Another version of Robert's chapter on the Yucatán project was published as "Landscapes of Indifference: Robert Smithson and John Lloyd Stephens in the Yucatán," *The Art Bulletin* v.82, nº3 (September 2000): 544-67, and more recently as a chapter of her book *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 86-113. Other texts that primarily refer to the project, although not as extensively, are Marjorie Perloff, "The Demise of 'And': Reflections on Robert Smithson's Mirrors," *Critical Quarterly* 32, nº3 (1990): 81-101, Robert Linsley "Mirror Travel in the Yucatan: Robert Smithson, Michael Fried, and the New Critical Drama," *Res* 37 (Spring 2000): 7-30, and Susan Boettger, "In the Yucatan: Mirroring Presence and Absence," *Robert Smithson*, organized by Eugenie Tsai with Cornelia Butler, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art in association with University of California Press, 2004, 200-05. Shorter discussions of the project are found in Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 98-104; Henry Sayre, *Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 222-26; Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981, 151-65, Ronald Graziani, "(De)Terminating the Political Enframent in the Art by Robert Smithson," Phd diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1992, 139-43; Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2003,163-91.

[99] Roberts, "Mirrored Travels," 24.

by time and the consequences of that mediation for the different activities that archaeologists conduct in the field. In other words, I follow Michel de Certeau's idea that every story is a discursive articulation of a spatializing practice.[100]

Likewise, while I recognize Smithson's reference to archaeological strategies to contest the construction of history, I am more interested in discussing why such a critique is so appealing to archaeology today. Butterfield speaks about Smithson's use of an "archaeological paradigm," but the boundaries between such a paradigm and her current "paradigmatic" understanding of archaeology within the history of archaeological thought are unclear. I believe that what she means by archaeological "paradigm" is just a "vocabulary," a set of archaeological concepts such as "burial," "excavation," and "site report." My understanding of paradigm follows instead the definition of Thomas Kuhn.[101] More than a set of concepts, a paradigm involves theoretical internal consistency within a discipline. Each paradigm will thus approach similar archaeological concepts differently. One of the most interesting aspects of Smithson's *Incidents*, as well as of other of his works, is how he seems to anticipate many postulates of the postprocessual paradigm in archaeology. Butterfield's own reading of Smithson's critique to the documentation of the past is indeed informed by postprocessual ideas, but that was not the case for Smithson.[102] My intention is not to characterize Smithson as a postprocessualist, rather to explore why he "sounds" like one. I propose that Smithson's theoretical relationship with the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss is key to frame the links between *Incidents* and postprocessualism. One must,

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[100] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988, 91-130.
[101] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
[102] It is telling that all sources cited by Butterfield in reference to archaeology are post 1982, the year in which Ian Hodder published *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, his "manifesto."

however, put Lévi-Strauss into historical context since the works addressed by Smithson are part of a much larger and contradictory body of the anthropologist's writings.

The Enantiomorphic Effect

Ann Reynolds has suggested how Smithson's early geometric sculpture sought to confound visual expectations and to create discomfort for viewers.[103] An artwork that epitomizes this premise is *Enantiomorphic Chambers* of 1965 (Fig. 8). As explained by Smithson "the binocular focus of our eyes converges on a single object and gives the illusion of oneness, so that we tend to forget the actual stereoscopic structure of our eyes or what I will call 'enantiomorphic vision'—that is seeing double."[104] *Enantiomorphic Chambers* objectifies this theory of physiological optics. Smithson replaced the two similar pictures usually set on each side of a stereoscope with two similar mirrors. When the viewer is positioned between both mirrors/chambers, she/he has no vanishing point to hang on to and thus no fused image of the his/her reflection. The illusion of a double vision's single sight is revealed as just an illusion that is culturally conditioned.

This idea of deceitful perception—or visual disappointment—is also present in Smithson's *Incidents*. Smithson himself brings up the relationship in the ninth mirror displacement calling the nature of the journey "enantiomorphic":

> Some "enantiomorphic" travel through Villahermosa, Frontera, Ciudad del Carmen, past the Laguna de Terminos. Two assymetrical trails that mirror each other could be called enantiomorphic after those two common enantiomorphs—the right and left hands. Eyes are enantiomorphs. Writing the reflection is supposed to match the physical reality, yet somehow the enantiomorphs don't quite fit together. The right hand is always at variance with the left. Villahermosa on the map is an irregular yellow shape with a star

[103] Ann Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 59-75.
[104] Robert Smithson, "Pointless Vanishing Points," *Writings*, 359.

> in it. Villahermosa on the earth is an irregular yellow shape with no star in it.[105]

The artist is referring to the illusion of oneness between the actual trip route and the route written on the map of the area he is traveling through. Moreover, throughout his route Smithson is displacing mirrors that not only emphasize the enantiomorphic relationship between abstraction and reality, but act as receptacles of fleeting moments that are never the same. When analyzing the Yucatán project, Robert Hobbs not only draws on Smithson's enantiomorphic remark, but takes the mirroring relationship a step further:

> All that remains for the viewer is the problematic mirror of the essay. The essay and the displacements, then, can be regarded as opposing mirrors positioned in much the same way as those of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*- on each side of the void, oblique views of disembodied seeing.[106]

I, too, use Hobbs's idea of enantiomorphs to approach Smithson's *Incidents.* Although I agree with his suggestion, I employ the metaphor to demonstrate how *Incidents* and archaeological fieldwork practice can be positioned on each side of the void, recognizing that my interpretation of Smithson's work does not necessarily match what he originally intended to do.

Smithson was obsessed with the stage of prehistory that predates humanity. *Incidents* is one of Smithson's works that most literally addresses the human archaeological past and the human impact on the construction of such a past. Although he uses some literal and metaphoric references to archaeological objects, I concentrate on how his artistic practice brings up dilemmas that are inherent to the fieldwork process. These dilemmas only became apparent in archaeology with the advent of postprocessualism in the early 1980s. The key to the enantiomorphic relation between *Incidents* and archaeological fieldwork is that although

[105] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 131.
[106] Robert Hobbs, *Sculpture*, 153.

the paradoxes of each practice mirror each other, they are not exactly the same because they come from different directions. In this respect, *Incidents* provides an extensive array of metaphors for postprocessual readings of the project. I discuss why Smithson's work is so receptive to many ideas later advanced by this paradigm.

Mirrored Practices: *Incidents* and Archaeological Fieldwork

If we are to discuss the parallels between Robert Smithson's *Incidents* and archaeological fieldwork, one must understand what exactly constitutes that stage of archaeological research. Regardless of the theoretical orientation of different authors, most current field methods books agree that the stage of fieldwork in archaeology deals with the ways in which archaeologists acquire data in the field. [107] Acquisition of data involves three main activities or strategies, which are site survey (reconnaissance/location), surface collection, and excavation.[108] The recording of each process usually entails the production of field notes, photographs, drawings, measurements, and maps. While surveys do not alter the morphology of sites, surface collections and excavations imply the removal of archaeological remains from their original matrix. Once the morphology of a site is transformed, there is no turning back; the recording of the process is vital to carry spatial information elsewhere along with the removed remains themselves. One fieldwork season may consist of all-three recovery activities or simply one or two, depending on the nature of the problem and objectives of the research in question.

[107] A standard textbook is Brian M. Fagan, *In the Beginning: An Introduction to Archaeology*, Upper Saddler River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001, 153-223. Where there is theoretical disagreement is on how and why to conduct fieldwork. For this latter discussion see Gavin Lucas, *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork*, Routledge, London, 2001.

[108] The different theoretical backgrounds of archaeologists become apparent in the way in which they approach each stage of data recovery.

On a formal and literal level, there are more differences than similarities between *Incidents* and archaeological fieldwork. Starting with the published essay itself, the title acts as a direct reference to John Lloyd Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* of 1841. Stephens's narrative is the report of early exploration in which he acquired archaeological data in the form of images—Fredrick Catherwood's lithographs—and actual material remains. Smithson was not only aware of Stephens' amateur expedition, but he was critical to its romantic nature: "…The first investigations of the Yucatan were really brought by some scientist's curiosity in Atlantis… So ["Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan] becomes that kind of reflection of [these expeditions], but it's an anti-expedition..."[109] Although Smithson sought to represent nature as chaotic instead of balanced, thus the *anti*-expedition, his essay acts as a field report following Stephens's documentary style. Smithson indeed wrote *Incidents* in May of 1969, just after returning from Mexico, and included pictures taken during his trip as well as other photographs and references gathered before, during, and after the journey.[110]

Turning to the content of *Incidents*—specifically to the *activities* that Smithson reports to have performed while in Yucatán, more parallels with archaeological fieldwork arise. The most evident is the trip. Smithson traveled from his place of residence in New York to a distant location. Moreover, the destination of Yucatán was not only the same destination of Stephens's expedition, but a place with strong collective associations to an

[109] Smithson, "Four Conversations," *Writings*, 231. For a detailed comparative analysis between Stephens and Smithson see Roberts, "Mirrored Travels," 132-200.

[110] Generally, the site report involves the analysis of data analysis rather than its mere description. In the Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers (hereafter Smithson Papers), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, I could only find drafts of the *Incidents* essay, but no notes written during the trip. These drafts, with several scratches and changes from the published one, could be paralleled with the stage of data analysis. Smithson is somehow processing the information collected in the Yucatán as well as the ideas raised throughout the journey. In Smithson's engagement calendar of 1969 the days of May 5-10 are marked as "Rest, write article on Yucatan," Smithson Papers, reel 3832, frame 532.

archaeological past.[111] Once in Yucatán, Smithson wandered through the peninsula looking for sites on which to execute his installations, an activity that recalls archaeological surveys. The reconnaissance of the area was aided with tools that are common to archaeologists in such circumstances, such as a rental car, a plane, and maps. Unlike archaeological surveys, however, Smithson was not looking for something already there for him to recover, he was trying to locate places where he could produce his artwork.

As revealed in the essay's pictures and text, the formal character of these pieces also has little to do with fieldwork strategies. The mirror displacements consist of a set of nine to thirteen 12x12 inch square mirrors cantilivered or suspended in a random grid pattern on different surfaces (Fig. 9). By placing objects on the ground or tree branches instead of retrieving objects from those surfaces Smithson's artistic strategy was additive. So only when he was removing the mirrors did Smithson parallel the subtractive aspect of archaeological fieldwork strategies. From this perspective, the displacement of mirrors from one location to another, and ultimately to New York, recalls archaeological surface collections. Furthermore, by placing and removing mirrors Smithson acted as both object and subject of archaeological study. On the one hand, as object (the past), he performed an activity leaving nothing but footprints. On the other hand, as subject (archaeologist), he cleaned up after himself. The act of collecting his utensils could be equated with archaeological surface collection of a very recent past (his own activity), or with archaeologists' removal of their own recording tools (e.g., trowel, string, plastic bags, labels).

When Rosemary Joyce analyzes the richness and diversity of the languages of archaeology in contemporary practice, she asserts how "the word 'archaeology' is embedded

[111] The findings of local and international archaeologists who still work in the area are strongly advertised by a growing tourist industry. For the archaeological past as tourism see for example Quetzil Castañeda, *In the Museum of Maya Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

in commonplace language as a journey to the field, the site of a dig where discoveries are made."[112] Robert Preucel goes even further when pointing out how "fieldwork" is widely considered *the* stage of archaeological data acquisition and a *synonym* of excavation so that "metonymically, the part stands for the whole."[113] This linguistic analysis is interesting since when looking at Smithson's *Incidents* the artist never refers expressly to his work as archaeological, and yet he engages in a series of activities that are commonly identified as such. Although his journey to a land of discoveries resonates as the epitome of field archaeology, the production of his installations resembles every fieldwork strategy except for excavation, the most widely recognized part of the whole. Moreover, in formal terms, Smithson's installations do not resemble archaeological subject matters either, although we know that he is aware of them. In the essay, Smithson brings up the similarities between Carl Andre's work with metals and an Olmec mosaic mask, but he was not interested in emulating ancient production himself. Smithson avoids including the archaeological past of Yucatán as a backdrop for his installations. Just as in *Hotel Palenque*, the photographs that record each mirror displacement only focus on the mirrors, neglecting any potential reference to surrounding ancient ruins (Fig. 10). Nevertheless, they must take place in that specific location.

The subversion of the stereotypical image of archaeological fieldwork in *Incidents* clashes with a cultural expectation by creating a visual disappointment upon viewing it. Smithson takes you to the distant, exotic locale where archaeological discoveries are commonplace and yet, shows you nothing but squared mirrors that could have been placed

[112] Rosemary A. Joyce, *The Languages of Archaeology: Dialogue, Narrative, and Writing*, with contributions of Robert W. Preucel, Jeanne Lopiparo, Carolyn Guyer, and Michael Joyce, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 28.
[113] Robert W. Preucel, "First Dialogue: Feminism, Fieldwork, and the Practice of Archaeology," *The Languages of Archaeology*, ed., Joyce, 19.

anywhere. Smithson often expressed his preference for locating his artwork in "infernal regions" with evidence of "man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes" since "nobody wants to go on a vacation to a garbage dump."[114] His selection of the Yucatán, however, suits the category of romantic ruin where everyone wants to go to spend a vacation. Moreover, Yucatán stands out as the perfect vacation destination where tourists can mix the pleasure of nature (beach) with archaeological ruins (Maya past). As evidenced in most tour advertisements for the region—both now and then (1960s)—the beach/ruins equation comes always as a unitary package, even if the weight on each component is different. Although Smithson is aware of Yucatán's archaeological past, he visually disrupts the illusion of oneness between the two.

In the text of *Incidents*, however, one finds what the photographs deny. The essay is full of direct references to the archaeology of Mexico and, to a lesser extent, to the practice of archaeology as a discipline. Because Smithson made the work available to the public as an essay, he may have wanted the displacements to be approached in relation to the textual content of the piece. Moreover, he wanted the viewer to read that text. The references to the archaeology of Mexico are scattered throughout the essay and allude to Maya and Aztec cosmology—mainly sacrifice and mythology—both supported by bibliographic sources plus a photograph of the Olmec piece that Smithson compares to the work of Carl Andre.[115] In order of appearance the books cited are J. Eric S. Thompson's *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*; Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*; *Tourist Guide and Directory of Yucatán-Campeche*; *Official Guide to Uxmal*; Victor W. Von Hagen's *World of the Maya*; C. A. Burland*'s The Gods of Mexico*; Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer's article "Gifts for the Jaguar"from

[114] See, respectively, Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" [1972], *Writings*, 146; "Cultural Confinement" [1972], *Writings*, 155.
[115] See the photograph in Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 128.

National Geographic; Bernardino de Sahagun's *Historia Universal de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (with parts translated into English in Burland's book), and Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis, The Antedilluvian World*.[116]

The nature of these sources is very eclectic as Smithson mixes current scientific literature (Thompson, Lévi-Strauss, Drucker and Heizer, von Hagen) with non-scientific works (Burland,Donnelly, tour guides).[117] Within the scientific sources Thompson, von Hagen, and Drucker and Heizer share a culture-history approach to their research that is highly descriptive, particularistic, and object-oriented. At the time that Smithson went to Yucatán, however, the "New Archaeology" was already underway and many archaeologists were in fact conducting research in Mesoamerica.[118] Smithson did not delve into that type of problem-oriented literature, not because of a theoretical choice, but because he opted for narratives and topics that appealed to a wider audience.[119] Drucker and Heizer's article on the Olmec was published in *National Geographic*, which implies a less technical language and an emphasis on the great discovery. Likewise, Thompson's book deals with hieroglyphic writing, a subject that commonly draws non-specialists because of the allure of a mysterious code. Along with emphasizing chronology, Von Hagen's paperback provides a

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[116] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 119, 119, 120, 120, 123, 131, 131. Only C. A. Burland's book is part of Smithson's library as was left at the moment of his death. For a list of the contents of Smithson's library, see "Robert Smithson's Library," compiled and organized by Lori Cavagnaro, *Learning from New Jersey*, Reynolds, 297-345.

[117] Reynolds also notes how Smithson seems to have discriminated between texts on the basis of subject matter rather than "scientific" validity contrasting books in his library, but not cited in the text (James Churchward's *Lost Continent of Mu* and Peter Nehembki's *Latin America: Myth and Reality*). See Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 173.

[118] See, for example, Kent V. Flannery, "Archaeological Systems Theory and Early Mesoamerica," *Anthropological Archaeology in the Americas*, ed. Betty J. Meggers, Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1968, 67-87, and Kent V. Flannery, "The Olmec and the Valley of Oaxaca: A Model for Inter-Regional Interaction in Formative Times," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1968, 79-110.

[119] Further evidence from his library indicates that his archaeological books were of this kind. Smithson was not interested in archaeological theory *per se*, but in the ways in which it touched upon issues that were relevant to him in the realm of the visual arts.

general description that covers most aspects of Maya life giving the impression of internal homogeneity.

Lévi-Strauss's book is the only exception to this pattern. Unlike the other cited sources, *The Savage Mind* does not focus on Mesoamerican archaeology but on the anthropology of South American tropical societies. In addition, it both shares some of the theoretical principles advanced by the New Archaeology (disregard of history, search for universal laws) and is written in a complex scientific style more suitable for specialists. Smithson's use of Lévi-Strauss plus his extensive collection of geology, physics, geometry, and mathematics books attest to the artist's deep interest in science, primarily natural, and at the same time reveals how his approach to archaeology, both as a discipline and as Yucatán's past, was rather superficial and historical.[120] Likewise, the only concrete allusion to the archaeological process in *Incidents* is restricted to The Seventh Mirror Displacement's narrative. Here Smithson uncritically describes what stands out as a pedestrian task of the profession:

> Archaeologists had tried to transport a large stone stele out of the region by floating it on dugouts up the Usumacinta to Agua Azul, but they couldn't get into an airplane, so they had to take it back to Yaxchilan. There it remains today, collecting moss—a monument to Sysiphus.[121]

The character of *Incidents*' references to Mexico's archaeology is as striking as the nature of the sources from which they come. Smithson chose to address the past through ancient sacrifice and mythology. Despite the original meaning of these myths and practices for Mesoamerican natives, Smithson used them as metaphors for his own journey.[122] From

[120] See "Smithson's Library," in Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 297-345.
[121] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 128.
[122] On her dissertation, Butterfield writes extensively on this subject that I will not reiterate here. Please see Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past," where she interprets the appeal of mythological references to Smithson considering their specific original meanings.

this perspective, Smithson's metaphors mirror metaphors deployed by archaeologists themselves when conducting fieldwork, especially if one considers fieldwork more as a social practice than a scientific methodology. As Preucel stresses, fieldwork both constitutes and reproduces archaeology as a profession acting as a rite of passage and a mark of status.[123] Preucel further notes that due to its use of tactics, reconnaissance, strategy, and being mostly a male endeavor, a pervasive historical metaphor for fieldwork within archaeology is war.[124] In the introduction of the essay Smithson engages in the use of both metaphors:

> The tranquil drive became a sacrifice of matter that led to a discontinous state of being, a world of quiet delirium. Just sitting there brought one into the wound of terrestrial victim. This peaceful war between the elements is ever present in Mexico—an echo, perhaps, of the Aztec and Mayan human sacrifices.[125]

For Smithson the drive down the peninsula was indeed a rite of passage, evidenced by a liminal state of delirium. Moreover, he identifies himself as a war victim, wounded by the omnipresence of Mesoamerican ancient cosmology. In sum, Smithson is conducting an artistic endeavor that does not come without a price, but he is willing to overcome the obstacles of the journey.

Joyce shares Preucel's view of fieldwork as social practice and adds the metaphor of the Hero Quest archetype that helps in understanding why a fieldworker endures so much hardship:

> as popularized by Joseph Campbell. The central figure [of the Hero Quest archetype] may be aided in his quest by all manner of supernatural or animal helpers, but he bears the sole responsibility for the outcome of the quest. He brings to bear the tools that his helpers provide, but they cannot effect the resolution of the narrative. As in our disciplinary practice of fieldwork. The Hero Quest has two distinct products: it changes the Hero, giving him a

[123] Preucel, "First Dialogue," 19.
[124] Preucel, ibid.
[125] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 120.

> unique authority; and at the same time, his actions result in the capture of a prize.[126]

Joyce's analysis is particularly relevant to *Incidents* because Smithson's approach to ancient Mesoamerican mythology is primarily through dialogic encounters with mythological deities. In several passages of the text, the artist gives voice to Aztec gods who join him in the trip to provide metaphysical revelations and advise Smithson on how to proceed in his artistic practice: "'The Jaguar in the mirror that smokes in the World of the Elements knows the work of Carl Andre,' said Tezcatlipoca and Izpaplotl at the same time in the same voice. 'He knows the Future travels backwards,' they continued;" [127] "Again Tezcatlipoca spoke, 'That camera is a portable tomb, you must remember that.';"[128] "'The true fiction eradicates the false reality,' said the voiceless voice of Chalchihuitlicue—the Surd of the Sea."[129] Instead of just using the Hero Quest as a metaphor like archaeologists do, Smithson is aided *by* mythological figures bringing the metaphor to life. However, Reynolds relates that according to Virginia Dwan, Smithson gave her (Dwan), Nancy Holt and himself a different deity to impersonate during the trip.[130] Smithson is thus aided by field assistants, the two women, but they are also incarnations of ancient gods. Interestingly, the artist owned a number of books on mythology, one of them Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, which may be the reason why he was familiar with the Hero Quest archetype and chose to use it in the fieldtrip.[131]

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[126] Joyce, *The Languages of Archaeology*, 23.
[127] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 123.
[128] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 121.
[129] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 123.
[130] Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 174.
[131] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, Viking Press, New York, 1962, in Smithson's Library, Smithson Papers, AAA. Reynolds also notes the sources for this influence, but not in relation to archaeology's use of the metaphor. Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 174.

Because Smithson was not conducting a scientific fieldtrip he could take the liberty of making the leap from metaphor to literalism and actually write about it in his "field report." His main objective was not to shed light on Mesoamerican archaeology, but on artistic matters with a peculiar help of ancient Mesoamerican knowledge. Moreover, he did not think those specialized sources—scientific and non-scientific—could help him. This is in fact one of the first revelations that he learns from a mythological deity: "'All those guide books are of no use', said Tezcatlipoca. 'You must travel at random, like the first Mayans you risk getting lost in the thickets, but that is the only way to make art.'"[132] Speaking about geological thinking and its impact on Smithson's work, the artist overtly expressed his consideration of scientific theories as fiction, and that there was no reason for science to have any priority in his esthetic.[133] Thus, the eclecticism of Smithson's archaeological sources is a reflection of the incompatibility between science and art making. Interestingly, his critique of archaeology as science is not based upon its most "positivist" phase, but on the one that the New Archaeology was reacting to (culture history). As an outsider, the mere fact that it was a science, was good enough for Smithson to critique archaeology's *modus operandi*.

Smithson is using the Hero Quest archetype metaphor in a very literal fashion to achieve a goal. That goal is not the revelation of an aspect of Mesoamerica's past, but the making of art and the by-products of such a process. The revelations that Smithson ultimately provides to the viewer about his quest are evident in the ways in which he recorded the Yucatán artworks. The impact of archaeological fieldwork now enters a strictly metaphorical level that only aids and strengthens his quest for the nuances of art making. The naked truth about science as fiction will act as a backdrop for revealing a similar truth

[132] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 120.
[133] See Robert Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson" [1970], *Writings*, 248.

about the art world. Yucatán provides the setting for unveiling a practice responsible for constructing the Yucatán as today's collective invention.

Mirrored Paradoxes: Incidents of Mirror-*Trouble* in the Yucatán

Although the *kind* of installations that Smithson made in the Yucatán is straight-forward—he displaced mirrors, when it comes to the specifics of each work, he took the advice of god Tezcatlipoca very seriously. He literally got lost in the thickets, and better yet, he literally gets us, the audience, lost in the thickets of his work as well. At the end of the essay Smithson reveals the complexity of his practice:

> If you visit the sites (a doubtful probability) you find nothing but memory-traces, for the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed. The mirrors are somewhere in New York… remembrances are but numbers on a map, vacant memories constellating the intangible terrains in deleted vicinities. *It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found*.[134]

In this paragraph the artist recognizes two important points: 1) the sites of the installations were left with no material traces of the works, all that remains is memory, and 2) memory takes material form in the *Incidents* document. Smithson exposes the tension of an activity that although absent is yet to be found. Moreover, when at the beginning of the essay the artist writes "Space can be approached, but time is far away," he gives the impression that such an absence can somehow be grasped, if not in time at least in material terms.[135]

Furthermore, under the Third Mirror Displacement Smithson adds "Space is the remains, or corpse, of time, it has dimensions."[136] If we are to consider *Incidents* a concrete corpse of the installations' both real and elapsed time, it appears that its dimension of

[134] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 132-33.
[135] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 119.
[136] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 122.

absence could indeed be found. The quality of *Incidents* as a document, however, rules out the possibility of capturing the spatial dimensions of the mirror displacements. Space is not only the corpse of time, but it is also mediated by time. If one is to challenge the "doubtful probability" of visiting the sites, Smithson makes it practically impossible to find the installation's dimension of absence. The deceitful quality of his documentation is critical to achieve Smithson's goal of getting lost in the thickets of art making because it also forces the viewer to experience the work in a state of confusion.

Because the discipline of archaeology deals with time through space, the tension between the two as revealed by Smithson in *Incidents* is particularly striking. The paradoxes posed by the artist contemplate situations that precede and succeed the production of the document. Smithson's work acts on two different fronts, as artist and art critic. Such a temporal disjunction translates to concrete spatial implications for archaeology on two different levels. On the one hand, as archaeology's object of study (the past), Smithson poses the dilemma of having conducted an activity that left no trace but memory, and second, as archaeology's subject of study (the archaeologist), Smithson documents an activity that cannot be approached without his mediation. What is uncanny in terms of archaeological practice is that Smithson underscores the gap between an action that already took place and the inability to trace that space due to the mediator's (the archaeologist) manipulation of its records. Even if the mediator enables the apprehension of the past's spatial coordinates, Smithson's *Incidents* reveals the even more uncanny amount of information that is still to be lost in between. *Incidents* denotes how each displacement site is a place with a long term history of everyday practice. Nevertheless, only the material aspects of that history can potentially be approached spatially, the rest is simply nowhere to be found. Smithson's main

goal in *Incidents* was to make the second paradox apparent not only in relation to documenting the fleeting archaeological past, but the documentation of ephemeral art practices. The second paradox is a by-product of the first one. Although not necessarily foreseen by Smithson, it provides insight into archaeological field practice.

a) Smithson as Archaeology's Subject of Study: The Archaeologist

Both in the photographs and in the text of *Incidents*, Smithson tries to confuse the reader with vague pointers toward the location of his installations. As mentioned earlier, the photographs are close-ups of the mirrors omitting potential indicators of each work's specific whereabouts. The scale of the map that is published in the essay is not only large, but it also bears big numbers that hide the—at best—approximate location of each installation (Fig. 11). The text increases the sense of disorientation. Smithson describes each mirror displacement making sure to never provide information as to where exactly he executed each installation. For example, about the Second Mirror Displacement (Fig. 12) he writes:

> *Somewhere between* Uman and Muna is a charred site. The people in this region clear land by burning it out. On this field of ashes (called by the natives a 'milpa') twelve mirrors were cantilevered into low mounds of red soil. Each mirror was twelve inches square, and supported from above and below by the scorched earth alone.[137]

Furthermore, many times the information that Smithson offers in the text contradicts the information that he provides in the photographs. Whenever the artist describes the number of mirrors that are displaced, that number is consistently twelve. The photographs, however, show that the number of mirrors ranges from ten to thirteen.[138]

[137] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 120-1. Emphasis mine.
[138] Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past," Roberts, "Mirrored-Travels," and Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, also note this disagreement.

The deployment of deceitful information as well as vocabulary is the antithesis of a scientific field report that archaeologists aim to recount with accuracy and precision (whether or not objective is another story). This strategy of consciously evasive documentation stems from the artist's work with "nonsites." In 1967 Smithson was hired by an architecture company as an artist consultant in order to help design an aerial terminal in Dallas, Fort Worth. This "earth art" experience led him to develop a dialectics between artworks conceived as the "original" (site) and artworks conceived as "fragments" (nonsites) of that primordial entity. In his article *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, of 1968, Smithson explains the dynamics of this type of work:

> [The Non-Site] in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container is in a sense the fragment itself, something that could be called a three-dimensional map. Without appeal to "gestalts" or "antiform," it actually exists as a fragment of a greater fragmentation. It is a three-dimensional perspective that has broken away from the whole while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning.[139]

Smithson was indeed more interested in issues of limits than of form. The dialectics between the fragment and the totality speaks about the limits of the artwork: where the whole ends and the part begins. In addition, non-sites allude to a dialectics of place, setting the limits between the outdoors (site) and the indoors (exhibition space). Instead of advocating one or the other side of the dialectics, Smithson's work pointed to a non-discrepancy and dual unity between the two poles. While the whole and the part are physically presented as separate units, they need each other in order to exist because they are constituted in the form of a necessary relationship. Although they need each other as a point of reference, that same reference point also cancels them out. The non-site—as fragment, points to the site—as the

[139] Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Writings,* 111.

whole, but the quality of that pinpointing does nothing to bring the fragment back to the whole.

Smithson executed an array of non-sites that varied according to their kind of container and material (Fig. 13 and Fig.14). Whether they consisted of wooden bins, aluminum bins, rocks, gravel, photographs, maps, mirrors, or text, they never provided the accurate coordinates of the Site.

> The containment is an abstraction, but the containment doesn't really mean anything. There is no object to go toward. In the very name "non-site" you're really making a reference to a particular site but that particular site evades itself, or it's incognito. You're on your own. You're groping out there. Yet you're directed out there. The location is held in suspense. The non-site itself tends to cancel out the site. Although it's in the physical world, it's not there.[140]

The evolution in the material constitution of the non-sites peaks in complexity with the incorporation of mirrors, such as in *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* of 1968-69 (Fig. 15). With the introduction of looking glasses Smithson objectified the conceptual "mirroring" relationship between the part and the whole. Moreover, although the mirrors act as literal signifiers, their ability to reflect is different when in the part or in the whole. Smithson once again brings up the morale of an enantiomorphic relationship by bifurcating the illusion of oneness in its two true components. In the site/non-site dialectic the fragment no longer holds as document of the whole, but stands as a whole in its own right because, although similar, they are not the same.

As an evasive document of the Yucatán experience *Incidents* unites, yet in a slightly different and more complex fashion, all the elements displayed in the non-sites. The most salient difference with its antecedents lies in the physicality of the work of art. *Incident* takes the site/non-site dialectic a step further by reducing the non-site to the flatness of images and

[140] Robert Smithson, "Four Conversations," *Writings*, 218.

words as reproduced in an art magazine. The frame, now confined to pieces of paper, does not even allow the geographic question of the here and there because there is no raw fragment brought from Yucatán. Although in the non-sites the raw material did not lead to the site—it only reassured its tentative existence, it was at least a *material* negation. In *Incidents* the raw material no longer solidifies the hypothetical because it no longer exists. In this respect, non-sites stress the ambiguities of a dialectics of place while still conforming to the genre of sculpture as three-dimensional entities (or at least a combination of three-dimensional and two dimensional elements) exposed in a gallery space. Alternatively, *Incidents* builds on the uncertainties of the spatial relation while overturning both the physicality of the artwork (two dimensional only) and its mode of exhibition (art journal). *Incidents* presents itself as the pinnacle of Smithson's interest in the incapacity of finding (un)certainty:

> Mirror pieces (Yucatan)—nine places spill out to peripheral zones. It is not anything you can pin down, because then it would be the simple act of logical ideation which doesn't interest me. It is more in the area of surd possibilities, the other side of the rational. There is an attempt to regulate the irrational aspects. So my work is always uncertain, but at the same time the uncertainty is arrested where the system breaks down, or where the incapacity comes in. To locate that is even more interesting than a willful, logical position; anybody can do that.[141]

Smithson is straightforward when commenting on the arbitrary aspects of his documentary process. While he is using the tools of an art critic (and art historian), he expressly challenges the validity of those tools. In the passage of the Seventh Mirror Displacement Smithson asserts: "All the reflections expired into the thickets of Yaxchilan. One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the

[141] Robert Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson," edited by Paul Toner and Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 240.

abstraction of language for the real thing."[142] Moreover, admitting that to reconstruct what the eyes see in words is a vain exploit Smithson proposes to reconstruct one's "inability to see."[143] And that is exactly what he does. Let us remember that some of the information that he provides in the text of *Incidents* does not match the information revealed in the photographs. Thus, while describing in words the inaccuracy of abstractions he goes on to prove his own statements in the practice. Smithson does not use photography and written language as a means to an end, he transfers the viewer's attention from the content of the abstraction into the making of the abstraction and the abstraction itself.

Through a peculiar "field report" Smithson's *Incidents* evoked a traditional practice that follows field archaeology—the document that records information retrieved in the field. Moreover, the artist directly commented on the arbitrariness of such abstractions not only in relation to art writings but to documents that have helped construct today's view of the Yucatán. Many of those latter abstractions are the result of archaeological investigation including Stephens's travelogue as well as the guide books that god Tezcatlipoca deemed as having no use. In the discipline of archaeology, however, attention to the arbitrary aspects of the process of recording information in the field came long after Smithson's *Incidents*. At the time Smithson traveled to Mexico, American archaeologists were reacting to the paradigm that had governed the discipline since the turn of the century. They thus critiqued history as a synthetic framework of "cultural types" as much as Smithson did. In this sense, archaeological fieldwork in Mesoamerica during the late 1960s represented an anti-expedition of Stephens's pre-scientific journey, but also an anti-expedition of the fully scientific endeavors of Heizer and Drucker, von Hagen, and Thompson. Instead of

[142] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 129.
[143] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 130.

investigating particular sites, New Archaeologists were interested in the relationships between sites in order to explain and predict wider problems such as subsistence patterns (ecology), trade, and social organization. The New Archaeology in the Yucatán opted for a deductive approach, regional in scope bringing attention to the fringes of monumental sites (e.g., households). From this perspective, archaeological research at the time of *Incidents* shared Smithson's interest in the periphery (visual obliteration of archaeological ruins).

The most important breakthrough within the New Archaeology led by Lewis Binford was its emphasis on a methodology derived from the natural sciences. As Trigger puts it:

> Binford championed the positivist view that explanation and prediction are equivalent and that both rest upon the demonstration of a constant articulation of variables. The rigorous application of a positivist approach was seen as eliminating subjective elements and establishing a basis for the objective, scientific interpretation of archaeological data. [144]

New Archaeologists tested archaeologically observable and non-observable variables in a statistically significant number of ethnographic situations. Correlations were valid insofar they held true under specific conditions. Hence a New Archaeologist such as Binford would agree with Smithson's dismissal of Stephens' account, as well as the texts by Heizer and Drucker, von Hagen, and Thompson, as mistaken abstractions of Yucatán's past. However, the target of each critique is completely different. Although Binford does not believe in the kind of questions that culture-history archaeologists ask, nor in the methods by which they answer those questions, Binford does believe in his own questions and most importantly, in his methods. Using the right and objective means to the past, there is direct access to that past. From this perspective, the New Archaeology sustained the positivist pretense of ethical neutrality, exactly what Smithson was critiquing. As noted earlier, Smithson was also

[144] Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 301.

questioning the validity of history, but he was critiquing the kind of questions and methods used by culture-history archaeologists as much as he would have critiqued those of archaeologists like Binford had he known them. Smithson was contesting the validity of the means to construct history, which he believed unable to be neutral. Given the New Archaeology's almost belligerent emphasis on objectivity, *Incidents* would appear to be a direct response to that type of archaeology as well. Yet it is not.

Today, Smithson's revelations about the arbitrariness of the documentation process are commonplace to many archaeologists. Nevertheless, archaeologists came to question Binford's infallible statistical method only a decade after *Incidents*. Since Hodder paved the way for a postprocessualist era, the points made by the dialectics of Smithson are no longer taken for granted. But Hodder published his groundbreaking volume in 1982, thirteen years after the publication of *Incidents*, and nine years after Smithson's death. As Hodder admitted, the contribution of this first period or "early exploratory phase" of subversion against the positivism of the New Archaeology, was to bring it to the forefront. The consequent problems in relation to verification, meaning and symbolism were yet to be answered. What helped these archaeologists react against positivism was the recognition that culture was not detached from the mind; it was historically constituted as opposed to a passive result of ecological restraints. As active producers of culture themselves, archaeologists realized their own cultural biases when interpreting other (past) cultures.

Archaeologists concentrated on arguing for several means to the past as opposed to only one, Binford's. This is not to deny Binford's merits. As Leone states, "this entire experimentation with scientific method was important—and remains so—not because the past is so difficult to know, but rather because of the many pasts we can and do habitually

create. Some measure of their match with past reality was needed."[145] The multiplicity of pasts attests to archaeologists' awareness of their equally multiple historical conditions. Archaeologists do not bring the past to knowledge in an objective fashion they instead construct a political document about it. However, they still want to produce a more plausible document than not. In *Incidents* Smithson objectified his critique to a single history through undertaking two specific activities common to the art historian/critic and the archaeologist: writing and taking photographs. Interestingly, his practice resonates with that of archaeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley.

Writing Matters

Incidents was not the first instance in which Smithson wrote or referred to written language through writing. Since the mid 1960s the artist published articles in several art journals especially *Artforum* and *Arts Magazine*. He wrote about the work of fellow artists, his own, and sometimes he wrote about issues relevant to art in general. Writing enabled Smithson to play the roles of both art critic and artist; in an interview with Paul Cummings, the artist explained that "[Writing] comes out of my sensibility—it comes out of my own observation. It sort of parallels my actual art involvement. The two coincide; one informs the other."[146] This involvement with one another becomes clearer when Smithson refers to language as matter not that different from other materials that he uses in his artistic practice. He adds "I was interested in language as a material entity … as printed matter—information which has a kind of physical presence for me. I would construct my articles the way I would construct a work."[147]

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[145] Mark Leone, "Childe's Offspring," *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, ed. Hodder, 181.
[146] Robert Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art," conducted by Paul Cummings, *Writings*, 273.
[147] Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art," *Writings*, 294.

The quality of writing as printed matter is in some cases more evident than in others. Published articles such as *Strata A Geophotographic Fiction* (Fig. 16) display unorthodox formats (e.g., mix of different fonts, inserts) that force the reader to literally look at the article for its value as printed matter instead of concentrating on the content. Looking at *Incidents* from the perspective of printed matter makes it easier to realize that it not only stands as an unconventional non-site in its own right, but that having the format/frame of an art journal is irrelevant.

Smithson's consideration of the physical aspect of writing may have gone hand in hand with his detection of an illusion of oneness in the general reception of art writings. Since writing and his "actual art" were not mutually exclusive, Smithson disliked the art world's privileged status of writing as the key to visual (artistic) matters.

> To talk constantly "about seeing" is a linguistic problem not a visual problem. All abstract concepts are *blind*, because they do not refer back to anything that has already been seen. The "visual" has its origin in the enigma of blind order—which is in a word, *language* … When art and memory combine, we become aware of the *syntax* of communication.[148]

This 1967 statement brings attention to the printed quality of the text as the only visual aspect to relate to; all other "visual" references are blind. According to Smithson, the road to understanding the syntax of communication becomes evident when art and memory collide. That is exactly what he does in *Incidents*. His essay is informed by memory as he declares under The Seventh Mirror Displacement: "There was a friction between the mirrors and the tree; now there is a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences."[149] Memory implies absence, and indeed, the only material element of the work is the article itself, as printed matter. Although Smithson is writing

[148] Robert Smithson, "The Artist as Site-Seer; or a Dintorphic Essay" [1966-67], *Writings*, 343.
[149] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 129.

about mirrors, they are just blind abstract concepts. Moreover, the content of that language is literally deceptive in relation to what really happened with the mirrors, as well as when and where. To use Smithson's own words: "Here language 'covers' rather than 'discovers' its sites and situations. Here language 'closes' rather than 'discloses' doors to utilitarian interpretations and explanations."[150]

On a general level, Smithson's materialist view of writing as printed matter is not that different from Shanks and Tilley's materialist view of archaeology as text. [151] In *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, the archaeologists note that as such, they observe the traces of the past, then record them, and write about them. They produce texts to the degree that archaeology depends on those texts in order to exist. Moreover, Shanks and Tilley note that until the late 1980s, attention had focused on the technical efficiency of writing and publishing to communicate the past to an audience rather than on the implications of transferring the past's traces into linguistic form. Shanks and Tilley make that leap and bring attention to recognizing that "archaeology as production of text or narrative is not identical with the past" let alone with the meaning of that past.[152] In a way similar to Smithson's, the archaeologists disengaged archaeological writings from the object of their content enabling them to stand on their own—as the product of a practice, as if they were non-sites. Although Shanks and Tilley refer to archaeological narratives as the published end product of the research process, they imply that whenever the act of writing is present in intermediate stages such as field notes or field reports, the same conditions of

[150] Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art [1968]," *Writings*, 78.
[151] Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987], 16-22.
[152] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, 19.

linguistic transference apply. A final published archaeological text is the summation of several texts produced along the research process.

Shanks and Tilley's remarks on the power of writing have important implications for the practice of fieldwork, which is "by no means a technical and neutral practice" as they themselves suggest.[153] Written notes are just one mode of recording and interpreting traces that are observed *in situ*. Shanks and Tilley call attention to the physical involvement of fieldworkers in the act of observing past remains, which is active rather than passive. Archaeologists act upon the leftovers of the past in real time, today's time; they sample, they collect, they destroy (excavation), they write. In other words, archaeological narratives are informed by several abstractions, not always in written form, that take place all along the fieldwork experience.[154] When working in the field, in his sites, Robert Smithson was also aware of the subjective component embedded in the outdoors experience. During a conversation with fellow artists Michael Heizer and Denis Oppenheim he expressed: "I don't think you're freer artistically in the desert than you are inside a room."[155] Smithson was referring to the dialectics between the open space and the art gallery, and how his production was in constant tension with the limits posed on each side of the relation. From this perspective, the openness of the outdoors tends to mask the agency of the artist in places where scale surpasses the four walls. And for Smithson scale is critical to art since "Scale depends on one's capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception. When one refuses

[153] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, 22.
[154] Using this reflexion as a departure, Shanks has dealt extensively with the analogy of archaeology as art performance, which he calls "theatre/archaeology." There are different scholars working on this idea, but Shanks is the common thread to all. See for example Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992; Mike Pearson, "Theatre/Archaeology," *The Drama Review* 38, vol. 4, (1994): 133-61; Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001. In this analysis I will concentrate on the strategies of writing and photographing rather than in performance as a whole.
[155] Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer," *Writings*, 244-5.

to release scale from size, one is left with an object or language that *appears* to be certain. For me scale operates by uncertainty."[156] Smithson's awareness of the actualities of perception in art making couples Shanks and Tilley's validation of the subjective component in the making of archaeology.

Photography

As evidenced in *Incidents*, Smithson's experience in the outdoors was often related to photography. Not only was he aware of the scale of the places where he was taking the snapshots, but also of the scale of the photographs themselves and of the disagreement between the two. He was fascinated with photography's ability to encapsulate both space and time in a rectangle. As an extreme example of abstraction, non-sites involving photographs epitomized their own definition as fragments of a greater whole. *Incidents* is using this strategy of ultimate abstraction but in the context of the field report where photographs appear as descriptors of observations made in the field. As discussed earlier, Smithson used written language to shift the viewer's attention from the actual mirror displacements to the essay itself. His use of photography fulfills a similar goal. Smithson notes how photographs are not a faithful representation of what really happened in the Yucatán. Aware of god Tezcatlipoca's revelation that a camera is a portable tomb, in the Seventh Mirror Displacement Smithson writes: "The load of actual, on-the-spot *perception is drained away into banal appreciation*. The ghostly photographic remains are sapped memories, a mock reality of decomposition."[157] The photographs of each one of the mirror displacements are by no means an objective description of what Smithson did. Not only are they a fragment, but a fragment made up after several decisions.

[156] Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" [1972], *Writings*, 147. Emphasis original.
[157] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 129-8. Emphasis mine.

If photographs are snapshots of fleeting moments, the fixation of mirrors in a picture acts like a double arrestment. The mirrors displaced in the Yucatán were reflecting transitory images on themselves. The photographs of the displacements not only capture a fleeting moment of Smithson's activity, but also of the moment already captured in the surface of the mirrors. Since each mirror reflected something different depending on its position, no mirror—*in situ* or as photographed—can be the same.[158] In *Incidents* Smithson provides only one picture of each mirror displacement meaning that there is only one visual way to apprehend the installations. In other words, the viewer is forced to accept all the decisions made by the artist when capturing the images (e.g., angle, objective, distance, light). But the array of Smithson's decisions does not end in the site. The way in which the photographs are displayed in the essay takes us back to the idea of language as printed matter. Although the grid pattern in which the pictures are displayed somehow compensates for the lack of order in the site and the account of what went on in the site, that choice of layout is yet a choice. In sum, the photographs collude with the written text so as to provide a deceitful portrait of each installation.

Smithson was as critical of the overpowering role of written text in the construction of history as he was of that of photography. In an interview with Patsy Norvell he said "perhaps ever since the invention of photography we have seen the world through photographs and not the other way around."[159] This statement is particularly interesting to archaeology because non-archaeologists relate to most of the remains of the past through photographs. The ways in which archaeologists decide to show those remains condition the viewers approach not only to the remains themselves but also to the past cultures that

[158] For extended analysis on the use of mirrors, as well as on the metaphoric relation between mirrors and photography see Owens, "Earthwords;" Shapiro, *Art After Babel*; and Sobieszeck, *Photo Works*.
[159] Robert Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. (Patsy) Norvell" [1969], *Writings*, 193.

produced them. Although in *Incidents* Smithson chose not to expose the role of photography in the construction of Maya archaeology, he referred to the visual construction of the distant past elsewhere:

> The Nazca lines have meaning only because they were photographed from airplanes, *at least for our eyes conditioned by the twentieth century. All we can do is use our orders and systems to investigate them*, and they generally turn out to be wrong—like "Stonehenge Decoded." Stonehenge doesn't strike me as a Neolithic computer. *What is interesting is how we fail to understand such remote things*.[160]

Smithson's words once again engage in close dialogue with those of archaeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley. Smithson thought that interpreting the past was a practice embedded in the present as much as postprocessualists do, and that photography played an important role in such a process. From this perspective, the photographs of the mirror displacements may not be directly adding to the construction of the Maya archaeological past, but they do help construct Maya culture at large through the eyes of Robert Smithson.[161]

Shanks has insisted upon the traditional role played by photographs in archaeological texts where they either provide "pictorial atmosphere" or act as "documentary witnesses."[162] Along with contesting both usages, Shanks recognizes the ambiguity of photography as an objective document and stresses its active role in the making of the past. Moreover, he suggests expanding the documentary function of photography to portray not only what is found but how findings are made. In other words, Shanks uses photography's subjectivity to reveal archaeology's own subjectivity as a practice that produces the past. From this perspective, rather than just photographs of trenches and uncovered pots, archaeological field

[160] Robert Smithson, "… The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master" [1971], interview with Gregoire Müller, *Writings*, 255. Emphasis mine.
[161] By consciously deleting any reference to archaeological ruins from his photographs, Smithson was indirectly constructing an image of the Yucatán that does not rest upon the historical weight of the archaeological past. Smithson's visual disengagement of past and present helps constructing a version of the Yucatán that is not fixed in a cultural expectation.
[162] Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, 184-5.

reports and publications should offer more photographs of archaeologists taking photographs of trenches and pots, writing notes, and ultimately, making decisions. Shanks does this in his book *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, where he borrows a strategy from David Hockney's *Cameraworks*. Several illustrations in the book consist of collages of archaeological sites that literally evoke the fragmentary nature of the archaeologist's approach to the past. The photo-work of Mitford castle in Northumberland, England (Fig. 17), for example, is composed of eight overlapping photographs of the site. Except for one photograph, they all capture the architectural remains of the castle, but from different angles and at different scales. The remaining picture features Shanks himself in the surrounding area of the ruins. When pieced together, each photograph helps provide a general view of the castle, while at the same time evoking and mapping the nuances of Shanks' physical experience of Mitford.[163]

Shanks' use of photo-works to portray Northumberland recalls Smithson's use of photography to portray his own mirror displacements in the Yucatán. While both of them seek the same objective (to expose the arbitrary aspects in the construction of history), Shanks is more didactic and Smithson more dialectic. Shanks spells out the fragmentation of historical re-construction in the form of a literally fragmented collage, while Smithson presents standard unitary photographs that can well be regarded as "documentary witnesses" or "pictorial atmosphere." Only when the photographs are confronted with the written text, and thus the dialectics do, they unfold as fragmented views of Smithson's incidents in the

[163] Other photo-works in the book extend the "view" of sites beyond the field experience. Collages are composed by pictures of different angles of the sites, as well as by pictures of museum pieces, people, places other than the site, etc. These fragments attest not only to the seamless experience of a site *in situ*, but also to the seamless activity of interpreting the site and the past at large. It is a portrayal of the archaeological research process, showing how data is retrieved from the site as much as it is retrieved from elsewhere. Shanks photo-works are maps of the thinking process when interpreting the past; the images map out the different sources that inform the final narrative.

peninsula. The viewer realizes the disagreement between what is written and what is shown, and that by no means can the nine photographs encompass the complexity of Smithson's practice as he describes it. Smithson uses the format of the field report as a backdrop (almost as pictorial atmosphere) for his dialectical "lesson," the critique to archaeological field reports comes by default. Conversely, Shanks uses an artistic strategy (Hockney's) as a backdrop for a direct and didactic critique of archaeological texts. Although Shanks executes his "artistic" lesson in published form (in a printed book), one can assume that he deploys the same strategy in his field reports.

Despite the boldness of Shanks and Tilley's "revelations," there is a lag between theory and practice regarding their attention to the making of archaeology, especially the practice of fieldwork. They, for instance, referred to the subjectivity of photography in 1987, but only in relation to museum displays. In 1993, Shanks further analyzed the issue and provided a practical example through the use of photo-works, as described above.[164] That same year, Ian Hodder designed a website to provide information about the activities of his project in the site of Catalhöyük, Turkey. By accessing the website, one also had access to the excavation diaries of different team members, excavation databases, microartefact distribution plots, and more.[165] As much as the website made the arbitrary and subjective aspects of recording activities public, it materialized eleven years after Hodder's theoretical remarks on the historical specificity of archaeological practice. No wonder the critiques to postprocessualists, especially Shanks and Tilley, relied on their inability to provide concrete methods on, for example, how to proceed in the field.

[164] Tilley, along with Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender employed the same technique in their article "Art and the Re-Presentation of the Past," *Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, (2000): 35-62. They also included scribbles from their field journals.
[165] See http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/catal/catal.html.

More recently, in 2003, there have been a handful of new efforts in such a direction as evidenced in two sessions of the *Fifth World Archaeological Congress:* "Archaeology/Media" and "Ethnography of Archaeology."[166] Perhaps a step-by-step methodological recipe on how to conduct archaeology—and especially field archaeology—*à la postprocessual*, is not the most important point of the matter. The practical examples of Shanks and his followers deal, in fact, with a material way of incorporating the subjective and paradoxical aspects of research into archaeological narratives. Rather than altering the course of archaeology altogether these archaeologists opt to make the subtleties of that same course evident and public.

Following Michel de Certeau we come to realize that every story—about art, about archaeology—is a spatial practice.[167] De Certeau's understanding of spatial practice stems from a clear differentiation between space and place. While place refers to the stability of elements that coexist, space refers to the intersection of elements that are mobile. In other words, space is a practiced place. Daily practices therefore consist of back and forth passages from place to space. Both art and archaeological stories are spatial practices about places, but in the process of apprehending those places they constitute practiced places themselves. The problem with both types of spatial stories is their tendency to act as "maps," and thereby as an ensemble of abstract places, in which they erase their own itineraries. As de Certeau explains:

> The organization that can be discerned in stories about space in everyday culture is inverted by the process that has isolated a system of geographical places. The difference between the two modes of description obviously does not consist in the presence or absence of practices (they are at work everywhere), but in the fact that maps [e.g., art history, archaeology] constituted as proper places in which to *exhibit the products* of knowledge,

[166] "Abstracts," Fifth World Archaeological Congress, Washington, D.C., June 21-26, 2003, 221-6.
[167] See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115-30.

> form tables of *legible* results. Stories about space exhibit on the contrary the operations that allow it, within a constraining and non-"proper" place, to mingle its elements anyway.[168]

From this point of view, Smithson's and Shanks' spatial stories about the Yucatán and Mitford openly expose the operations that allow the stories to exist as such. Moreover, they exhibit those operations graphically, in visual form. So Smithson was on the right track (at least de Certeau's track), after all, when asserting that "language is as primary as steel. And there's no point in trying to wish it away."[169]

Artworks like *Incidents* not only denounce the tyranny of language but use it as an argument to make such a case. Ironically, Smithson's mock of a scientific field-report, plagued with inaccuracies and contradictions, renders itself as not that far away from what a social science's field report really is and, sometimes, admits to be. From this perspective, *Incidents* matters not only for what it communicates conceptually but also for what it represents as printed matter. Smithson was emphatic when it came to denying categorizing himself as a conceptual artist.[170] Although I do not believe that he wrote so profusely just for the sake of his words' physical value, I do believe that, unlike other mindsets that are mostly conceptual (e.g., archaeologists'), Smithson succeeded in maintaining a fluid and dialectic relation between written and visual language.[171] In *Incidents* he dealt face to face with the instability of spatial stories that are usually taken for granted as proper places. And that is frightening. Frightening for those who produce those stories and for those who hold on to the stability of those stories. In a twisted way, Smithson's *Incidents* visually—and not less practically—sought to expose one's inability to see.

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[168] Ibid, 121.
[169] Smithson, "Four Conversations," *Writings*, 214.
[170] See, for example, Smithson, "Four Conversations," *Writings*, 208.
[171] Although artists and archaeologists rely heavily on their visual skills, their "visions" are completely different. I will return to this idea at the end of this section.

b) Smithson as archaeology's object of study: the past at large

The former section centered on the documentary aspect of *Incidents* and therefore considered Smithson as the archaeologist's enantiomorph. Rather than a passive narrator of his own past activity, he played an active role in the making of the document and therefore of his own recent history. From this perspective, recording activities, such as writing and photography, proved to be not that different from the "incidents" that they report. Traveling to Yucatán, traveling within the Yucatán, placing and displacing mirrors, taking pictures of the mirrors, and even "conversing" with ancient deities, were activities that contributed to the meaning of *Incidents* as much as the written text and selection of shots for its printed version. Admitting that Smithson's creative process did not cease "out there," in Yucatán, mirrors archaeologists' assertion that more than merely discovering past remains in the field, they create pasts: here, there, and everywhere. The past is always present. Although it may seem a contradiction, and indeed it is, this section focuses on Smithson's incidents in the Yucatán prior to their documentation through writing and photography. I will use his reportedly traceless practice as a metaphoric attempt to bring attention to all those traceless activities that have happened in the past at large but that, unlike Smithson's, we do not know about. They are the everyday practices that de Certeau refers to as "opaque and blind."[172] From this point of view I approach Smithson as archaeology's object of study, the past at large.

In *Incidents*, as in all of his non-sites, Smithson takes for granted that the viewer will not travel to the site. Not only does he provide no help or encouragement, he ultimately admits that there is no point in doing so. But what happens if one is to indeed give the futile experience a chance? The thought of traveling to Yucatán to have nowhere to go and find nothing is as frightening as realizing that the documentation of Smithson's traceless activities

[172] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

is not neutral. An exercise that Smithson deemed futile helps to increase one's awareness of the randomness of social practice. It acts as a constant reminder that no matter how many refined techniques archaeologists deploy, there are practices that they will never be able to grasp. In their own everyday practice, archaeologists rarely have the opportunity to be told expressly by their object of study about all the information they will fail to recover. [173] That is what Smithson' *Incidents* is about. On some level, this object-subject "dialogue" bears some similarity to the methods of archaeologists who use historical and ethnohistorical sources to inform their research. Although archaeology proves that the material record often contradicts what people claim to have done and meant, texts can at other times provide clues on what to look for and where. What is distressing about Smithson's *Incidents* is that he admits having conducted a traceless activity while also admitting that the clues to apprehend that activity are purposely mischievous. From that perspective, dead people did not purposely live their lives thinking how to fool archaeologists (except for Smithson, clearly), they fool them by default, because they either left no material trace or because if they did, those traces are subject to archaeologists' inability to see.

Back to Smithson's practice in the Yucatán, he did not leave traces of the mirror installations *in situ*. However, that was not the only traceless activity he executed. To name a few, he rented a car, read maps and tourist guides, took a plane, overturned rocks, made an earth map, and rode a dugout. Needless to say, although not mentioned in the text or shown in the photographs of *Incidents*, Smithson must have conducted several other activities, let alone sleeping and eating. What is common to all these practices is that they are as

[173] In *Theatre/Archaeology* , Pearson and Shanks touch upon this analogy between art performance and the archaeological past. Unlike the examples of art performances that they use, Smithson had no audience and therefore did not conceive of that part of his artwork—or any other—as strict performance. Here, I am considering the performative aspect of his work as the performance of everyday life, with a less defined script.

ephemeral as Smithson's mirror installations. Due to the intense mobility of his journey, even if Smithson had left nonperishable material traces of each, they are unlikely to be found. Ephemeral practices tend to leave behind extremely shallow deposits of refuse, making those sediments extremely hard to trace. The nomadic character of Smithson's incidents of travel is not that different from those in the life of hunter-gatherers. The difficulty of grasping this type of ephemeral activity is by no means new to archaeologists. Indeed, they have been so aware of it that for a long time they favored the study of monumental sites of complex and sedentary societies from which, at best, they inferred what life must have been like in the periphery.

As mentioned earlier, the New Archaeology in the 1960s introduced the deployment of sampling techniques to survey entire regions, which may or may not contain the traditional major sites, in order to understand the relations between these locales. Consequently, New Archaeologists shared Smithson's interest in the periphery. Many regional studies aimed to understand the lifestyle of hunter-gatherer societies and, in the course of such an endeavor, some archaeologists found that the traditional definition of site (a "cluster" of artifacts, ecofacts or features) as archaeology's minimal spatial and operational unit was not good enough to deal with deposits that did not make the mark. Regional sampling procedures offered the opportunity to replace the concept of "site" with "cultural item" (individual artifacts, features, ecofacts). In 1975, David Hurst Thomas published an article to formally address this issue and, ironically, he defined cultural item sampling as "nonsite" archaeology.[174] A couple of years after Smithson's death, Hurst Thomas came up with the same term used by the artist since 1967 to also deal with a spatial issue.

[174] David Hurst Thomas, "Nonsite Sampling in Archaeology: Up Creek Without a Site?," *Sampling in Archaeology,* ed. James W. Mueller, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1975, 61-81.

Technically, a strategy to trace Smithson's sites, in the Yucatán or elsewhere, could literally be nonsite archaeology. But if we are to trace the locales where he installed the mirrors, not even that strategy would work unless Smithson had left behind something other than the absent mirrors. If Smithson left absolutely nothing, his footsteps will always remain as anonymous as many of his other opaque practices. From this viewpoint, even if his "directions" to the mirror displacements were accurate, one would not find anything. The disturbing quality of Smithson's *Incidents* is that it brings attention to a material absence. The disappointment stems from knowing that at some point something did happen but access to it has been denied forever. The awareness of an event that left no trace is not common in one's relationship with the past. As Smithson put it, we are used to seeing the world through the comfort of photographs.

Hurst Thomas' nonsite archaeology poses more problems than the limits of the technique itself, of which he was also aware. He reduced a spatial issue (predicting the occurrence of cultural artifacts as evidence of non-sedentary lifeways) to a matter of scale. Space was thus considered as an abstract dimension that could be objectively measured using the adequate parameters. Even if the sites of Smithson's incidents in the Yucatán could be detected, they will be considered the mere containers of human activity with no value other than examples of universal, cross-cultural, mobile behavior. This "empty" conception of space was drawn from the New Geography, the analogue of the New Archaeology in the 1960s, with a strong positivist underpinning. As Tilley notes:

> Space as container, surface and volume was substantial inasmuch as it existed in itself and for itself, external to and indifferent to human affairs. The neutrality of this space resulted in its being divorced from any consideration of structures of power and domination. A space divorced from humanity and society provided a coherent and unitary backdrop for any analysis, since it was always the same … As a dimension in which human action took place it

> was directly equivalent to and separate from time, the second primary and abstracted scale according to which societal change could be documented and 'measured.'[175]

Beyond the use of a similar word to describe a spatial issue, the coincidence of Hurst Thomas's and Smithson's "nonsites" deserves closer attention. Like Hurst Thomas', Smithson's nonsites are abstractions that can be measured, but they literally are not a site, they are an abstraction of a site, physically away from it. In his *Dialectic of Site and Nonsite*, Smithson describes sites indeed as quite the opposite of nonsites. They are in some place (physical), have open limits, a series of points, indeterminate certainty, scattered information, and are on the edge.[176] From this perspective, Smithson's nonsites conform to a New Archaeology definition of nonsite since as abstractions of the site (no physical place), they are an array of matter, have closed limits, determinate uncertainty, and contained information. Conversely, his sites, or better yet, his dialectics between sites and nonsites, are more in accord with postprocessual approaches to space.

Tilley is one of many archaeologists who have contested the usefulness of an abstract understanding of space as disengaged from human agency.[177] Their critique was enabled by the postprocessual revision of the discipline at large, and followed previous retheorizations of space within human geography.[178] Space was now considered to be socially produced and culturally specific; as described by Tilley:

> It follows that the meanings of space always involve a subjective dimension and cannot be understood apart from the symbolically constructed lifeworlds

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[175] Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*, Oxford and Providence: Berg, 1994, 9.
[176] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty [1972]," *Writings*, 152-3, fn 1.
[177] See for example, Tilley, *A Phenomenology*; Barbara Bender, ed., *Landscape, Politics and Perspectives*, Providence and Oxford: Berg, 1993; Julian Thomas, "Archaeologies of Place and Landscape," *Archaeological Theory Today*, ed. Ian Hodder, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, 165-86.
[178] Revisionist views of space in human geography preceded archaeology's for a decade. Examples of early critical studies are David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, London: Arnold, 1973; and Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion, 1976.

> of social actors … it can have no universal essence … Spatial experience is not innocent and neutral but invested with power relating to age, gender, social position and relationships with others … The experience of space is always shot through with temporalities, as spaces are always created, reproduced and transformed in relation to previously constructed spaces provided and established from the past. Spaces are intimately related to the formation of biographies and social relationships.[179]

Thus, the dialectics of Smithson can be viewed as a result of a human conception of space.[180] His abstract, rational definition of a nonsite is the product of the structures of power and dominance embedded in his mediation with the site. The nonsite is nothing more than the site through the eyes of Robert Smithson. Moreover, the construction of the nonsite encompasses the characteristics of the site as a place with open limits (Smithson's action only bounded by his own limits).

Conceptually, however, there is no dialectics between site and nonsite, they are both at the same side of the relation: the nonsite as object/document and place/space at the same time. From this perspective, Smithson alludes to the incommensurability of the physical site located elsewhere in geometric terms only. Moreover, with the creation of the nonsite Smithson disengages himself from the site, it only has value as the spatial fix of his artistic affair, but the structures of power and domination that operated in the site while he was there are overlooked. Smithson only sees the nonsites as the product of human space while the sites remain timeless and abstract. As much as the sites may be open, they are seen as mere containers of activity. Not in vain did he deem the doubtful probability of visiting the sites pointless. And yet, for all the theoretical distance that seemed to separate Smithson from Thomas, they actually remained close. From this viewpoint, the nonsites of Thomas are indeed Smithson's sites.

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[179] Tilley, *A Phenomenology*, 11.
[180] Tilley et al., "Art and the Re-presentation," 41-42, address this conceptual similarity.

Smithson's detachment from the sites would not be an issue had he not included them in his dialectics. On several occasions the artist made it clear that he was interested in the "back and forth" between the site (the object) and the nonsite, that the nonsites had the quality of "throwing one back" onto the site.[181] This relation of dependence is fully accomplished but only in the process of stressing his mediation in the construction of the nonsite. Although Smithson objectifies the enantiomorphic relation between the two poles, his point of departure *and* arrival is always the nonsite. A comment of Smithson on the selection of sites might be illuminating to this contradiction:

> The sites show the effect of time, sort of a sinking into timelessness. When I get to a site that strikes the kind of timeless chord, I use it. The site selection is by chance. There is no willful choice. A site at zero degree, where the material strikes the mind … sort of an end of selfhood … the ego vanishes for a while.[182]

In this statement, Smithson mentions how his site selection is made by chance while at the same time he asserts that he uses sites that strike the chord of timelessness. It seems that Smithson understands a willful choice only in geometric terms (e.g., measurable features in the landscape—Hurst Thomas' nonsites, or a preconceived route to follow) since, the way he puts it, what strikes his mind does not involve will. As long as the site triggers the willful choice, Smithson is the mere recipient of the site's will, so to speak. The quality of timelessness is therefore *in* the site and is independent from his ego, leaving the artist outside the structure of power and domination at stake in the site. Smithson's "end of selfhood" in selecting the sites acts as a metaphor for his own erasure from the place in which he is an active agent. He only takes responsibility for his impact on the site when the documentation process begins.

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[181] See for example Robert Smithson, "Earth" [1969], *Writings*, 178, 181.
[182] Smithson, "Fragments," *Writings*, 193-4.

The disjunction between Smithson's passive/timeless role in the site and active/historical role in the nonsite becomes apparent in *Incidents*. Although the only way to access whatever happened in Yucatán is through Smithson's abstraction, the ways in which he describes the nature of his action in the site is revealing. Consider the first epiphany that Smithson learns from god Tezcatlipoca : "'All those guide books are of no use … You must travel at random, like the first Mayans; you risk getting lost in the thickets, but that is the only way to make art.'"[183] These words paraphrase one of the two epigraphs that Smithson included in the section "Mapscapes or Cartographic Sites" of *A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art*, published a year prior to *Incidents*. The epigraph reads: "… all the maps you have are of no use, all this work of discovering and surveying; you have to start off at random, like the first men on earth; you risk dying of hunger a few miles from the richest stores… Michel Butor, *Degrees.*"[184] Smithson changed a few words of Butor to make the statement suit the Yucatán odyssey. The change of a phrase's context is relevant for two reasons. On the one hand, Smithson makes the analogy between books and maps, considering books as printed abstractions that lead to a *geometric* inhabitable point in space. On the other hand, he characterizes the first Mayans' travel as random, giving the impression that they had no clue about what they were doing; they just did it. Putting both ideas together it follows that only a map can provide a sense of willful behavior in one's actions. Regardless of the degree of accuracy in Smithson's comments on Maya culture, what matters here is his rationale.[185] Smithson's obliteration of ancient Maya agency resurfaces in the passive role that he assigns to his own artistic practice in the Yucatán, or at least to a part of it.

[183] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 120.
[184] Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" [1968], *Writings*, 91.
[185] I will not expand on Smithson's misreading of the Maya. Butterfield deals with his anachronistic use of sources that lead him to treat Mesoamerican cultures as a melting pot (mix of Aztec, Mayan and Olmec

Smithson reenacts the Hero Quest archetype to unravel the intricacies in the documentation of his own quest. He got lost in the thickets of art making, but as noted earlier, such confusion was crafted through its mode of presentation with a clear agenda in mind. Smithson did not just happen to randomly produce a document in the way he did it. The role of the quest itself, however, is downplayed by the privileged status of *Incidents* as both object and document. From this viewpoint, Smithson's practice in the Yucatán becomes an anecdote, the pretext for the final text. Smithson indeed describes his journey in such a way: "Just sitting there brought one into the wound of a terrestrial victim."[186] It seems that even as a war hero the wounds "came" to him because of the "ever present" peaceful war between the elements. Assuming this passive role, Smithson became aware of the impact of the Spanish and of Stephens in the construction of Maya history while positioning himself outside that analysis:

> Yaxchilan may not be wasted (or, as good as waste, doomed to wasting) but *still building itself* out of secrets and shadows. On a multifarious confusion of ruins are frail huts made of sticks with thatched roofs. *The world of the Maya and its cosmography has been deformed and beaten down by the pressure of years*. The natives at Yaxchilan are weary because of that long yesterday, that unending calamitous day. They might even be disappointed by the grand nullity of their own past attainments. Shattered recesses with wild growths of creepers and weeds disclosed a broken geometry. Turning the pages of a book on Mayan temples, one is relieved of the futile stupefying mazes of the tropical density. The load of actual, on-the-spot perception is drained away into banal appreciation. The ghostly photographic remains are sapped memories, a mock reality of decomposition.[187]

Whatever Smithson did in the Yucatán was either conditioned by something external to him, or motivated by something that would happen afterwards. The here and now

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information). On his defense, I would like to stress that Smithson was an artist, not an archaeologist or anthropologist; one should not expect him to be accurate when referring to ancient cultures.

[186] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 120.

[187] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 127-8.

coordinates that actively contribute to the building of Yaxchilán itself are nowhere to be found. He seems to justify that absence, saying that "artists are not motivated by a need to communicate; travel over the unfathomable is the only condition."[188] However, he *did* "communicate" lessons on the implacable role of time, but the objects of those lessons were selective. In *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, he stressed how "The existence of the artist in time is worth as much as the finished product," and therefore great artists could make art "by simply casting a glance." [189] Ironically, as much as he travels over the unfathomable land of Yucatán casting glances, he reduces the experience into something whose value is only apparent as long as it is measured, if not physically at least as a conceptual fix. Put it in de Certeau's words, Smithson only sees sites in terms of space, abstract space, but fails to see them as practiced places, where opaque and blind actions occurred under specific historical conditions.

As the enantiomorph of past activity, Smithson's traceless incidents in Yucatán attest to all the activities that will never be grasped. In his dialectical model, however, the sites where those activities took place are relegated to a doubtful spatial fix. This is not to say that Smithson was not aware of the complexities of his willful choices *in situ*, but that awareness only becomes apparent retrospectively and in an oblique manner through interviews, other writings, and so forth. Moreover, many times he portrays the nature of his own agency in ephemeral practices as passive, as if only affected by external elements. Thus, there is a contradiction and selectivity in the ways in which Smithson recognizes the impact of human agency, his agency, in the construction of meaning. For him it only occurs when they involve mediated abstractions.

[188] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 132.
[189] Smithson, "A Sedimentation," *Writings*, 112.

Like Tilley, Smithson realizes and demonstrates that the experience of space is always subject to time, but unlike the archaeologist, he acknowledges the temporality of his own practice only when he acts as mediator, not when he is actor. From this perspective, Smithson's approach to time and space seems to be suspended between ideas advanced by both processual and postprocessual paradigms in archaeology. In their need to generate methodological techniques to fix past activity in the field, New Archaeologists tend to forget that those places were socially constructed. They tend to also forget the social landscape in which they conduct their creative practice right now. While Smithson is very aware of his own historical specificity in New York, and in that way he surmounts a New Archaeology flaw, he tends to forget the intricacies of his affairs in Yucatán and elsewhere when he is in "the field."

Smithson as a Postprocessualist?

Either as the enantiomorph of the archaeologist or of the past at large Smithson's *Incidents* not only parallels but anticipates ideas advanced by the postprocessual paradigm in archaeology. This mirroring between the two practices responds to the historical coordinates in which they originated. Smithson's mature work falls outside the limits of categories defined by the artworld until the 1960s, challenging previous notions of what a sculpture should be in terms of materials, size, and location. By contesting these categories artists were also contesting the theoreticians behind them, especially Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Smithson was very vocal in his reaction to both art critics. In 1967, for example, he wrote a letter to the editor of *Artforum* mocking Fried and his objection to the

"theatricality" of the new art.[190] *Incidents* embodies such a critique by defying the category of sculpture or painting.[191] In a similar way, the work of postprocessual archaeologists in the 1980s falls outside the limits of previous categories designed to approach the past. By stepping aside from them, they were critiquing a very specific way of conducting archaeology, that of the New or processual Archaeology, epitomized in the person of Lewis Binford. Shanks and Tilley did not shy away from directing their critique to him either. Tilley also mocked Binford in one of his early 1990s writings, where he counts the times he repeats the words "objective" and "science" in his publications as a way of legitimizing its content.[192]

What triggers the enantiomorphism between the ideas of Smithson and the postprocessualists is not the fact that they are reacting to former limits, or that they are mocking those who impersonate such limits, but that those limits are substantially articulated under the auspices of positivism. The similarity between comments against this philosophical underpinning by the artist and the two archaeologists is thus extremely sharp. While Smithson states:

> Actually it is the mistakes we make that result in something. There is no point in trying to come up with the right answer because it is inevitably wrong … An art against itself is a good possibility, an art that always returns to essential contradiction. I'm sick of positivists, ontological hopes, and that sort of thing, even ontological despairs. Both are impossible.[193]

Shanks and Tilley go on to say:

> It is a tragedy that most archaeologists feel a commitment to carry on this completely discredited tradition of research in one form or another. In fact, if

[190] Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor" [1967]," *Writings*, 66-7.
[191] In Linsley, "New Critical Drama," the author proposes that *Incidents* is an extended response to Fried.
[192] Christopher Tilley, "On Modernity and Archaeological Discourse," *Archaeology after Structuralism: Poststructuralism and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. Ian Bapty and Tim Yates, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 128-52.
[193] Smithson, "Fragments," *Writings*, 195.

> positivism was actually taken to its logical extreme we would have to deny the possibility of any knowledge of the past beyond pure subjectivism.[194]

Smithson, and Shanks and Tilley, unite in their desire to break down illusions of homogeneity in the production of art and the past. To them, objective categories provide seamless fantasies that obliterate the fact that they are constructed categories to begin with. They thus opt for a way out of positivism's comfort zone, and they do so by following fairly similar routes that sometimes intersect. Although from completely different directions and with different takes, the three delve into similar sources, most notably from structuralism and literature, to craft an alternative paradigm to the restrictions of modernism and the New Archaeology. However, as much as these sources bring them together they also set them apart.

The Structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss

Reynolds has successfully begun to reconstruct Smithson's influence from French and non-French sources.[195] Among the French, the most salient are Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, whose ideas are also influential for the work of Shanks and Tilley. Smithson's interest in the French anthropologist was evident, as revealed in his library. At the time of his death, the artist owned four books by Lévi-Strauss: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, *The Savage Mind*, *Totemism*, and *Tristes Tropiques* as well as Georges Charbonnier's *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*. In addition, Smithson owned journals with excerpts from the anthropologist's oeuvre such as "Overture to *Le Cruit et le Cuit,*" and with

[194] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, 44.
[195] Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 134 and fn. 17. Although she admits the need to thoroughly reconstruct the impact of structuralist theory on the work of New York based artists in the mid-1960s, she also admits that such an endeavor is outside the scope of her study. However, she is successful in superseding previous works by Shapiro and Owens, who interpret Smithson's use of structuralism as intuitive rather than real.

articles about his work such as "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology" by Sheldon Nodelman. Except for *Totemism* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, all of these texts have underlined passages that sometimes translate to quotations in Smithson's writings.[196] This is the case of *Incidents*, whose second epigraph is one of the two passages from *The Savage Mind* that is underlined in Smithson's personal copy:

> The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness: its object is to grasps the world as both synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*[197]

Other references to this book are present in both explicit and implicit terms in Smithson's article *Ultramoderne* as well as in interviews with Paul Toner and Denis Wheeler.[198]

As it reads from the above quotation, Smithson was attracted to Lévi-Strauss's distinction between civilized and primitive societies, and especially to the rationale of the latter. According to the anthropologist, primitive or "cold" societies correspond to small-scale societies whose consciousness is driven by forces that resemble what physicists call entropy.[199] As opposed to "hot" civilizations that necessitate history to actively change, "primitives" seek to maintain their social structure in a state of equilibrium remaining oblivious to it. The function of cold societies is therefore to produce inertia through a

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[196] The underlining of texts, however, should not be considered an exclusive indication of the artist's close attention to them. Many times Smithson commented or wrote about sources whose personal copies are spotless. Conversely, books that are vigorously underlined are not always quoted in his writings.
[197] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 119.
[198] Robert Smithson, "Ultramoderne" [1967], *Writings*, 64, here Smithson refers to the "cold distant people of the Ultramoderne [who] installed themselves in many versions of the Hall of Mirrors," making an implicit analogy with the contents of Lévi-Strauss's book. Smithson's explicit references to *The Savage Mind* can be found in "Interview with Robert Smithson" [1970] edited by Paul Toner and Robert Smithson," *Writings*, 241 and in "Four Conversations," *Writings*, 206-07. Explicit references to *Tristes Tropiques* can also be found in Smithson's unpublished writing "Art Through the Camera's Eye" [c. 1971], *Writings*, 375, as well as in "… The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master" [1971], *Writings*, 257.
[199] See Georges Charbonnier, ed., *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1969, 38-9.

process that destroys its own energy and thus the characteristic timelessness of the "savage" mind. The concept of entropy had caught the attention of Smithson well before his encounter with Lévi-Strauss. As early as 1966 he used the term to characterize the work of his contemporaries as a "visible analog" for the Second Law of Thermodynamics.[200]

Butterfield, Roberts and Reynolds rightly note that Smithson found in the "timelessness" of Lévi-Strauss's cold societies the appeal of the crystalline and thus a theoretical analog for his own theories of disintegration.[201] While Reynolds ends her analysis of *Incidents* by stressing that "Smithson's mirror displacements are reenactments of the savage mind's room of mirrors" and therefore of the collapse of time, Butterfield and Roberts go on to suggest that Smithson extends that same concept of apathetic timelessness in his view of the local Mayans. I would like to build on the line suggested by the latter, but shifting the attention to Smithson's apathy toward his own artistic practice instead of his view, or lack thereof, the native others.

Briefly, through different routes of analysis both Roberts and Butterfield demonstrate that Smithson's "mock" of Stephens's expedition is not exactly antithetical as the artist suggested. Rather it further maintains the colonial spirit of the nineteenth-century narrative deeming the native other a laboratory for analysis. The use of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism allowed Smithson to identify and align himself with the rationale of primitive societies who denied history and, at the same time, as a method it enabled Smithson to address the Yucatán, past and present, ahistorically. According to Roberts, structuralism and savage thought united in their ahistoricity with minimalism's "cool sensibility" and conceptual art's "aesthetic of indifference." From a similar perspective, Butterfield asserts that for Smithson

[200] Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Writings*, 11.
[201] Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past," 66; Roberts, "Landscapes of Indifference," 557-61; Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey*, 185-7.

humans and nature reconcile in the realm of art, which is timeless and indifferent, not in that of technology and science, which is historical and continuous. Thus, Smithson's artistic practice in the Yucatán endorsed the widely accepted view of the 60s and 70s of the Native Americans as natural ecologists. Ancient and modern Mayans were in tune with nature, did not have an appreciation for history which made past and present be the same, and their own reality was locked up from historical approaches to it. But being natural also meant being passive, unable to produce agency of any sort, having no impact on the social fabric where they belonged.

In Roberts words:

> For all his inversions of Stephens's narrative, Smithson's perpetuates, even amplifies, Stephens's belief in Yucatecan amnesia, indifference, and myopia. And although he hopes to inhabit this status instead of performing corrective surgery on it, his work maintains much of Stephens's imperialist violence. Both Smithson and Stephens picture the Yucatán peninsula as indifferent in order to extract from it a heritage. For Stephens, the contemporary idleness of the Maya authorizes his appropriation of the region's archaeological artifacts. For Smithson, the idleness, now seen as eternal, is itself the artifact. It provides a primordial endorsement for passivism and a heritage, a "fundamental memory," of indifference.[202]

Seemingly, Butterfield suggests how Smithson's

> contention that the past cannot be recovered also denied native Mexicans the ability to recover their own past. The natives of Yaxchilán are portrayed as oppressed by that "long yesterday" and their past achievements are nullified. Is Smithson's work an attempt to "free" the natives from the oppression of their own history? The danger in such a strategy is that it validates the colonial enterprise which does not then destroy the Indian's past but "liberates" them to the rootlessness and decenteredness of modernity. Furthermore, as the Stephens example illustrates, this denial of native history is the first step along the road to colonialist domination: to deny the present inhabitants' ownership of the past is also to negate their ownership of the present natural and artistic resources desired by the colonizer. [203]

[202] Roberts, "Landscapes of Indifference," 563.
[203] Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past," 59-60.

The conclusions reached by both scholars reveal a central contradiction in Smithson's work. On the one hand, he recognizes the cultural diversity at work in the Yucatán and he moreover recognizes the failure of past attempts to approach such a cultural difference by placing it within Western "objective" evolutionary frameworks. On the other hand, he handles that diversity by stepping outside Western history and assuming a passive role that prevents him from correcting or uncovering official truths about Yucatán's culture. Smithson's apathy is a well-thought choice of which he is aware and makes sure that we—the audience—understand it as such. However, he does not give the Yucatán natives the same option. Smithson deems the ancient and contemporary Maya passive and apathetic because, following Lévi-Strauss, that is the way cold societies are supposed to be. Further, he decentered the other in the realm of art that, unlike science, did not have any ambitions of objectivity and therefore allowed him to overturn historical continuities more freely. From that perspective, Smithson embarked on an ahistorical project wherein an appreciation for cultural diversity and colonialism, although antithetical, could and, in fact, did coexist.

As much as I agree with this reading of Smithson's use of Lévi-Strauss, Butterfield and Roberts limit their understanding of the French scholar to the content of his ideas about history and the other. Because I am more interested in the ways in which Smithson's practice in the Yucatán recalls archaeological practice in the field, I am also more interested in how Lévi-Strauss, as an anthropologist, put forth his ideas into practice. The colonial undertone identified by Butterfield and Roberts in Smithson's *Incidents* finds an analog in the work and practice of Lévi-Strauss. Thus, the contradictory mixture of cultural relativism (the other as different) and colonialism (the other as passive) in Lévi-Strauss himself might

help explain the aptness of his work to that of Smithson. Likewise, it might illuminate the extent to which Smithson sounds like a postprocessual archaeologist.

Granted the appeal of timeless cold societies for Smithson's interest in the crystalline, Lévi-Strauss's cultural relativism was also a critique of the positivism of Neo-evolutionists. From that viewpoint, Lévi-Strauss's thinking could have also appealed to Smithson in this common front against objective criteria of analysis. As David Pace points out:

> This cultural relativism allowed Lévi-Strauss to attack not only the crude evolutionary theory of the nineteenth century, but also the more sophisticated arguments of neo-evolutionists, such as Leslie White. White attempted to re-establish the evolutionary paradigm on a new, value-free basis, by establishing evolutionary sequences on supposedly objective criteria, such as the relative ability of various societies to harness energy.[204]

By recognizing cultural diversity, Lévi-Strauss also recognized its neutralization in the process of writing histories about different cultures. He dismissed the value of history as long as it fostered objective, single, and progressive lines of human development that had more to do with the West than with the non-Western societies in question. Even anthropology did not escape Lévi-Strauss's harsh criticism. Many times, the French scholar referred to the discipline either as an ideological alibi for Western imperialism or as the product of Western guilt towards colonialism.[205]

Pace, however, notes that rather than being opposed to the notions of history or progress altogether, Lévi-Strauss disliked the notion that there was only *one* version of each: "There is not one history [said Lévi-Strauss], but rather many histories, a multitude of histories, a dust cloud of histories and, if it is possible to discover certain types of order in

[204] David Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes*, Boston, London, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge &Keygan Paul, 1983, 91.
[205] See Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 95.

these histories—and I think it is possible—there are evolutions, if not one evolution."[206] Lévi-Strauss's take on history is remarkably similar to the response that Smithson gave to a questionnaire from Irving Sandler in 1966.[207] For each question that Smithson was asked (e.g., Is there a sensibility of the 1960's? Is there an avant-garde today?) he responded that there was not one (e.g., sensibility of the 60's, avant-garde today) but ten, and then proceeded to enumerate them. This preference for multiple histories rather than *one* stands out as the opposite of positivistic manners of approaching reality. Moreover, it sounds very much like the postprocessual alternative to the New Archaeology. But, as I will suggest in the next few pages, this is as far as Lévi-Strauss and Robert Smithson go when it comes to counteracting positivism.

The last chapter of Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*, "History and Dialectic," the same one that Smithson underlined and quoted in *Incidents*, is an attack on Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. Sartre's book was an attempt to reconcile existentialism and Marxism by establishing one history of man with one truth and one intelligibility. From this perspective, Lévi-Strauss saw in Sartre the epitome of Western ethnocentrism and, as its critique, *The Savage Mind* reflects an extreme form of cultural relativism, one that is given an even more concrete turn in *Tristes Tropiques* in relation to cannibalism. Thus, both *The Savage Mind* and *Tristes Tropiques* stand out as some of, if not the most, radical works by Lévi-Strauss in their condemnation of ethnocentrism and universal objective history. And sure enough, they are the two books that Smithson most often referred to, not only in relation

[206] Lévi-Strauss quoted in Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 109.
[207] Robert Smithson, "Response to a Questionnaire from Irving Sandler" [1966], *Writings*, 329-31.

to *Incidents*, but in general.[208] Smithson found in *The Savage Mind* and *Tristes Tropiques* a feasible counterpart to his own critique of Western objective categories in the realm of art.[209]

As Pace rightly notes, "*The Savage Mind* was a synthetic work, and it could serve as an effective vehicle for the introduction of his ideas to non-anthropologists, if it received sufficient attention."[210] That was clearly the case with Robert Smithson. Pace's remark, however, discloses a more profound paradox of Lévi-Strauss, one that separates his role as "savant" (the social scientist) from his role as "philosophe" (the civil persona).[211] This divide is revealed in his work, which oscillates between a highly scientific pole (*Structural Anthropology*, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, *Mythologiques*) and a less "serious," synthetic and/or intimate one (*The Savage Mind*, *Tristes Tropiques*, interviews). Because the latter appealed to a wider audience, it also provided a platform to advance personal and more speculative ideas rather than strictly scientific anthropological remarks about a specific object of study. Interestingly, Smithson relied more heavily on Lévi-Strauss's role as philosophe in which he underscored the advantages of "savage thought" as an alternative logic to scientific rationality (positivism/history), as well as the critiques of ethnocentrism and cultural evolutionism.[212] The split in Lévi-Strauss's thinking would not be problematic

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[208] Smithson constantly refers to "entropology," as Lévi-Strauss calls what should be a new kind of anthropology, in the conclusion of his book *Tristes Tropiques.*

[209] What matters here is not Sartre *per se*, but what he represented for Lévi-Strauss and thereby for Smithson. There are several writings and interviews in which Smithson attacked the notion of objective absolute categories, especially in relation to modernist art. See for example "Outline for Yale Symposium" [1968], 360-61; "Entropy and the New Monuments" [1966], 10-23; "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" [1968], 100-113; "Aerial Art" [1969], 116-18; "A Short Description of Two Mirrored Structures" [1965], 328; "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, a Dintorphic Essay" [1966-67], 340-45, all in *Writings*.

[210] Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 111.

[211] Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 1-18.

[212] Aside from *The Savage Mind* and *Tristes Tropiques*, let us remember that Smithson owned and underlined Lévi-Strauss's interview with Charbonnier, as well as the "Overture to Le Cruix et le Cui," which uses classical music as a metaphor to analyze myth. *Totemism*, although not underlined, is according to Pace a serious work of anthropology, but is also a "highly polemical work in which many of Lévi-Strauss's personal values were clearly expressed. Whatever the objective scientific value of his detailed analyses, the purpose of the work as a whole seems to have been to undercut ethnocentric notions of culture." Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 177. The

except for the fact that there is no dialogue between the two poles, they even contradict themselves. This critical paradox lies at the core of the political critique to Lévi-Strauss advanced, among others, by postprocessual archaeologists such as Tilley.

Political critics of Lévi-Strauss object to his inability to extend his overt cultural relativism to himself. On the one hand, Lévi-Strauss has managed to downplay the significance of his personal views made outside scientific territory. On the other hand, and most likely as a byproduct of the former, he has been unable to relativize his own scientific work. Thus, as Tilley argues:

> Lévi-Strauss has no way of reflecting on how his own work arises—its status, its effects, its relation to social and political conditions … While Lévi-Strauss is able to describe writing, art and other cultural products of Western civilization as fostering patterns of inequality and dominance, science, or at least his version of it, apparently remains pure and untainted knowledge divorced from social value systems. While denying the superiority of the West in some of his work he then proceeds to reintroduce it in another form: that of science.[213]

From this perspective, Lévi-Strauss has remained a positivist who sees his academic anthropological practice as objective, having nothing to do with his speculations about culture and history. Whereas other cultures can be relative, his scientific practice is absolute. Moreover, Tilley adds that the explanatory framework of structural anthropology leads to the dissolution of concrete human beings and social forms:

> Any specificity is denied and this also includes Lévi-Strauss, who would have us believe that he does not actually *write* (i.e., make active interpretive choices) the *Mythologiques* but rather 'orchestrates' their progression. What might appear superficially as conscious and creative production on the part of

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only book that belongs to the scientific pole is *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, but Smithson's copy is neither marked nor cited in his writings or interviews.

[213] Christopher Tilley, "Claude Lévi-Strauss: Structuralism, and Beyond," *Reading Material Culture. Structuralism, Hermeneutics and Post-Structuralism*, ed. Christopher Tilley, Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 54-5.

> Lévi-Strauss is in fact itself produced by a determinate and determining underlying unconscious.[214]

Tilley's last point is particularly relevant in relation to Smithson's *Incidents* since Lévi-Strauss's "orchestrating" mode of writing matches the apathy of Smithson towards the landscape and natives in Yucatán. Although in *Incidents* Smithson makes an overt effort to expose the seams in the construction of the essay as a document, he makes us think that his practice *while in* the Yucatán was produced by a determinate and determining underlying unconscious. He is just orchestrating a progression of practices whose documentation will prove to be an act of interpretive creative choices, but only then (as a constructed document of a practice), not now (as practice). What complicates the issue is that the artwork is composed of both past (Smithson in Yucatán) and present (Smithson in New York writing about Yucatán). Smithson thus splits both temporalities assigning a different degree of awareness of his own agency and historical specificity to each. From this perspective, while *Incidents* is completely site-specific, the mirror displacements (and I am referring to the installations *in* Yucatán) are anything but site specific. The problem therefore is not to realize that art in the Yucatán is "timeless territory" for Smithson (as opposed to scientific, or pseudo scientific, endeavors such as Stephens's), but that even as such, it is a practiced place with its own structure of power and domination. Embracing a rationale of passivity and apathy Smithson not only denied political agency to the Mayans but also to himself.

Now we are thrown back to Smithson's site/non-site dialectics, or lack thereof. Let us remember that by directing attention to the specificity of the nonsite, Smithson relegates the site to an abstract space that is only valuable as a conceptual fix. And in the gallery—or printed magazine in the case of *Incidents*—that might indeed be the only physical way of

[214] Tilley, "Structuralism, and Beyond," 55.

relating to the site. What is striking, however, is that Smithson maintains the value-free approach to the site when he is in the location itself. As much as he recognizes that in the desert he is not freer than in the gallery, his selection of the sites, and in the case of *Incidents*, the selection of the mirror displacement spots, is driven by an entropic, low energy level search without "preconceived" ideas. The problem is that even the lack of a preconceived plan reveals an active interpretive choice. Somehow, it is as if Smithson is splitting his role as an outdoors and indoors artist. When he is away, in the field, his artistic practice is inoculate, driven by underlying indeterminate forces; when he is in the gallery, immersed in the art world that he overtly dislikes, he becomes an active agent trying to expose all the ills that come with it and that his own practice suffers from. In other words, he is very actively deconstructing the illusion of harmony within modernist standards, but when he walks away from that "art system," he is surrounded by an inexplicable harmony.

Lévi-Strauss's confusing mix of his scientific and civil persona might have caused Smithson's obliteration of the strictures of the anthropologist's thought. Or, perhaps, his own confusing personality split of modernist and anti-modern artist, which coincides with a spatiotemporal dislocation as well, may have contributed to not noticing Lévi-Strauss's central contradiction. In addition, the fact that both Smithson and Lévi-Strauss are transitional figures, trying to figure out a way of counteracting a rooted positivist paradigm, further allows the occurrence of inconsistencies in their practice. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, however, Smithson was aware of the paradox at stake. The same year that he produced *Incidents*, Smithson wrote about the exhibition *Can Man Survive* on view at the Museum of Natural History. At the end of the text he also wonders whether art can survive and writes: "Today the artist can uphold the failure of modernism with its pretense of closed, immobile

hierarchical values by being a slave to all its compromises or he can choose to be a terrorist. Savage forces make isolation doubtful."[215] Although in the latter part of his career Smithson followed a more "terrorist" route with the land reclamation projects, it seems that he took great pains to figure out that not only terrorism upholds a pretense of social action.[216] Ironically, by questioning the possibility of isolation, he questioned his own passive apathetic standpoint in the Yucatán.

Thus, if Tilley is so critical of Lévi-Strauss and thereby of Smithson, and of Hurst Thomas for that matter, how can Smithson still sound so postprocessual? In *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss argues that history may lead to anything providing you get out of it. Paraphrasing him, Tilley goes on to say that structuralism may also lead to anything providing you get out of it, and that's exactly what he and other fellow postprocessual archaeologists have done. Early in their career Shanks and Tilley clearly stated how their approach to structuralism was informed and *modified* by two major lines of theoretical influence: progressive Marxist sociologies and anthropologies, and various forms of post-structuralist critique.[217] The common denominator of these theories is a renovated sense of historicity, that according to Tilley "has usefully led to a dialectical theory of material-culture production in relation to social practices: that is not only structured but actively *structures*."[218] From this perspective, Lévi-Strauss's use of structures to establish sets of sociocultural relations is taken a step further in order to identify the kind of relations that the

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[215] Robert Smithson, "Can Man Survive?" [1969], *Writings*, 368.
[216] In his dissertation "(De)Terminating," Graziani discusses the ways in which Smithson chose to take a more active and specific role in the social apparatus. Aside from Graziani's viewpoint, it is intriguing that both Lévi-Strauss and Smithson are constantly criticized for their lack of active political roles in events such as May 68 and the artists union. I believe that the point is not whether they were or not in the line of fire, but whether they realized that their detachment was equally political. From this perspective, it strikes me that both Butterfield and Roberts discuss his apathy towards political activism as if it had been the only way of demonstrating some kind of active behavior.
[217] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, 253.
[218] Tilley, "Structuralism, and Beyond," 66.

anthropologist elides in his intellectual persona: power strategies, dominance, ideology and social contradiction. Furthermore, Shanks and Tilley extend the recognition of these sets of sociocultural relations to their own historically *specific* context instead of focusing on those of the past exclusively.

The similarities between Smithson's *Incidents* and the postprocessual paradigm, therefore, surface in the artist's overt effort to expose the structures of power and domination at stake in the making of the printed essay. The ubiquitous mediation of Smithson and his recent past is nothing but evident. Furthermore, the structuralist influence in both Smithson and Tilley is also apparent in their writings when looked at as printed matter. Their structural need to articulate sociocultural relations through sets of binary oppositions unfolds in the graphic summary of Smithson's dialectic of site and nonsite, and Tilley's abstract and human space (Fig.18 and Fig.19).[219] Historical specificity is thus key when bringing Smithson and Shanks and Tilley together. Awareness of their active role in constructing one of multiple ways to the past unites in a common front against the absolute categories endorsed by both modernism and the New Archaeology. However, that is the extent to which Smithson's *Incidents* recalls the postprocessual paradigm in archaeology since for every step he takes forward, he takes a half step backward.

Butterfield has suggested how the New Archaeology parallels the desire of both Lévi-Strauss and Smithson to escape from history since for new archaeologists

> the historical processes that formed cultures could never be reconstructed on the basis of the available archaeological data … shifted their attention away from reconstructions of native history and focused on formulating 'universal' generalizations with practical potential. In other words, New Archaeology was

[219] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Writings*, 152-3, and Tilley, *A Phenomenology*, 8. Interestingly, Tilley is aware of the structural and conceptual similarity between his dialectics and Smithson's, as acknowledged in Tilley et al., "Art and the Re-presentation," 41-42.

> not interested in native history in and of itself; instead native history became a source of potential solutions to contemporary Euro-American dilemmas.[220]

While the New Archaeology denies access to a particular history, it claims access to a general history via objective empirical testing. So in the end, processual archaeologists do have access to the past through a method that they consider absolute and infallible. Conversely, postprocessualists revalue historicity but not in the sense of thinking that they have access to a particular past "as it was." That is forever locked up, as much for them as for processualists. They do however believe in the historical specificity of past events as in the ability to interpret the traces of those events by researchers who are bound by specific spatiotemporal coordinates that affect their interpretations. They support a kind of history that recognizes itself as constructed, that is actively mediating between past and present from a political standpoint. In sum, as a printed essay *Incidents* seems to anticipate postprocessualism's historical specificity, but as a practiced place in the Yucatán, the mirror-travel remains closer to New Archaeology's view of the past as a cultural laboratory.

Jorge Luis Borges and the Logic of the Mismatch

Robert Smithson was an avid reader of literary fiction. Not only does his personal library attest to this with an impressive quantity of volumes that range from science-fiction to the beat generation, but his writings and interviews are filled with references and quotations of novelists. One recurrent name is the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges.[221] Although Smithson does not refer to Borges in *Incidents*, he became interested in the writer around

[220] Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past," 81-2.
[221] The books by Borges in Smithson's library at the time of his death, and in chronological order, are *Ficciones*, 1962; *The Cardinal Point of Borges*, 1964; *Dreamtigers*, 1964; *Labyrinth: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, 1964; *Other Inquisitions, 1937-52*, 1964; *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, 1969; and *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969, Together with Commentaries and an Autobiographical Essay*, 1970. In addition, Smithson owned several journals with interviews of and writings by Borges.

1965 and steadily addressed his ideas since 1966.[222] For instance, in 1972 Smithson admitted how a passage of his travelogue "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," which was published in 1967 and made no overt references to Borges, was inspired by a "Borgesian sense of passage of time and labrythine confusion that has a certain kind of order. And I guess I was looking for that order, a kind of irrational order that just sort of developed without any kind of design program."[223]

This Borgesian irrational order is what Smithson actually used in his writings and artwork as a metaphor for criticizing the rational order of categories and continuity promoted by the modernist art world. In other words, the ideas that Smithson picked up from Borges demonstrated a great appeal to his interest in the crystalline and therefore in the denial of history. The most evident examples of this metaphoric substitution are the artist's epistolary attack on Michael Fried and the paradox of the impossible movement, where the avant-garde plays the role of Achilles and progress the one of the Tortoise.[224] But beyond the content of Borges's ideas, Smithson was attracted to the manner in which the writer constructed his thinking: "the way he would use leftover remnants of philosophy … taking of a discarded system and using it, as a kind of armature. I think this has always been my kind of world view."[225] Beyond establishing whether Smithson's consideration of Borges's "armature" is

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[222] Quotations and/or references to Borges in pre 1969 published writings can be found in "Entropy and the New Monuments" [1966], *Writings*, 16, 18; "The Domain of the Great Bear" [1966] written with Mel Bochner, 27; "Quasi-Infinites and the Waning of Space" [1966], 37; "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site" [1967], 54; "Ultramoderne" [1967], 64-5; "Letter to the Editor" [1967], 66; as well as in the following unpublished writings: "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, a Dintorphic Essay" [1966-67], 340, fn2; and "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema" [1967], 351, all of them in Smithson, *Writings*.

[223] Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution," *Writings*, 293.

[224] See Smithson, "Quasi-Infinites" and "Letter to the Editor," *Writings*.

[225] Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution," *Writings*, 294.

right or wrong, I am interested in the fact that he thought of it as a practice of matching different pieces of information together.

Thus, the work of Borges appealed to Smithson's worldview in terms of the nature of his ideas and in the way in which those ideas were assembled as a body of thought. In *Incidents* we can detect both aspects of the equation: ideally in the use of the crystalline and abolition of historical time and strategically in the way in which Smithson constructed the essay using leftover remnants of very diverse sources. I will not discuss Smithson's use of Borges's ideas here, rather I will concentrate on his view of the writer as someone who used the leftover remnants from other thinkers. Shanks and Tilley share this strategy in their own postprocessual program.

As stated earlier in the chapter, it seemed awkward that Smithson could inform the archaeological contents of his essay with sources that are theoretically contradictory, that is to say an array of culture-history books that are themselves more *and* less scientific, plus the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. To add to the logic of remnant leftovers, *Incidents* includes references to an introduction to invertebrates and a philosophy text by George Santayana that uses biology to support a skeptical view of reality.[226] What we have therefore is a consistent pattern of inconsistency, a mix of a wide range of archaeology books, plus biology and philosophy, and yet there are some common threads to all of these sources.

The reference to Santayana corresponds to a quotation at the end of the essay, when Smithson argues that the only condition for artists is to travel over the unfathomable, not to communicate. The quote reads:

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[226] Ralph Buchsbaum, *Animals Without Backbones: An Introduction to Invertebrates*, and George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*: *Introduction to System of Philosophy*. Both volumes were in Smithson's library at the time of his death. Santayana's is underlined in the chapter entitled "The discovery of essence," including the passage that Smithson quotes in *Incidents*.

> Living beings dwell in their expectations rather than in their senses. If they are ever to see what they see, they must first in a manner stop living; they must suspend the will, as Schopenhauer put it, they must photograph the idea that is flying past, veiled in its very swiftness.[227]

From this perspective, Smithson may use Santayana's words to suggest that artists are not motivated by a need to communicate because that is an expectation held by outsiders, by non-artists. Moreover, according to Santayana, expectations rely on will rather than on senses. Thus, artists should travel randomly suspending their will or any kind of expectation for that matter. In this respect, Smithson's borrowing from Santayana's philosophy fits the Borgesian irrational order, an order that opposes the existence of fixed categories and thereby the notion of one objective history. Therefore, Smithson appears not to care about the context from which his sources arise as long as they help him stress his own irrational order. The chapter of *The Savage Mind* from which he extracted the second epigraph is framed by Lévi-Strauss's antagonistic take on a unique and universal history.

This strategy of mixing and matching different sources to fit an underlying idea is perhaps most evident in Smithson's unpublished essay "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, a Dintorphic Essay" (1966-67). Here, Smithson manages to find the common thread between four disparate characters, including Borges. The artist writes:

> Once we are free from utilitarian presuppositions we become aware of what J. G. Ballard calls "The Synthetic Landscape,"or what Roland Barthes refers to as "the simulacrum of objects," or what Tony Smith calls "the artificial landscape," or what Jorge Luis Borges calls "visible realities."[228]

Following this "hunter-gatherer" behavior, one comes to realize that in the case of *Incidents*, Smithson was not really interested in archaeology *per se*, but in the ways in which it could help him make a case against the power of a unifying history claiming objective truths. The

[227] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 132.
[228] Smithson, "The Artist as Site-Seer," *Writings*, 340.

use of theoretically contradictory sources is not an issue for him because Smithson casts glances, and thus makes art, while he cuts and pastes ideas from different authors. This logic attests to an impressive relational mind, capable of raising questions that had not been asked by modernists because they arise from fields of knowledge not associated with art practice. It is however the mind of an *artist* approaching archaeology, literature, geology, mathematics, philosophy and so on and so forth. Smithson himself recognized the implication of being an artist with a specific mindset:

> I've been reading "The Nature of Mathematics" by philosopher Max Block and it's very difficult for me—he thinks so differently about the subject from the way I learned to think of it, and his language presents problems. Maybe you feel the same way about cubes and octahedrons![229]

Far from denying the implicit dangers in Smithson's logic of the mismatch, to which I will refer later, one must consider that as much as he opened up a whole new world of possibilities for the practice of art and questioning of history, his words cannot be taken at face value. Moreover, the time when Smithson was putting forth his worldview is coeval with the time in which most of the structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers that he relied on began to be read in English. This is the case of Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault. Smithson owned two books by Foucault at the time of his death, which advanced ideas that were appealing to Smithson such as the "archaeological" identification of a modernist rational order rooted in the unchallenged supremacy of language.[230] Smithson indeed once said "I

[229] Smithson, undated letter to Toby Mussman, Smithson Papers, AAA, reel 3833, frame 1302.
[230] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

think it would take somebody to devote their whole life to a kind of archaeology of the art world and all its different tribal states."[231]

As was the case with Lévi-Strauss, Smithson had a partial approach to Foucault as we know the French philosopher today. On the one hand, Smithson relied on archaeological studies of rather "foreign" systems (the mad, the human sciences—especially the natural) where he did not recognize himself as an agent and therefore failed to realize the ills of his own reality as an anti-modernist artist. The work by Foucault that deals with the microphysics of power, which might have led Smithson into a more critical direction, was only translated into English in 1980.[232] Since Foucault's work has come to be digested and critiqued mostly in the 1980s, it would be foolish to expect Smithson to have had the same full-fledged analytical depth when borrowing from his ideas. Political critiques of Lévi-Strauss were first published right after Smithson's death.[233] That may be why the artist's logic of the mismatch today reads as particularly rough and inconsistent, although it may have not been the case during his lifetime. Indeed, Smithson's ability to question reality from unexpected angles lets him "shake" the conventions of the reigning art and archaeological (or historical) world and offer equally unexpected answers.

A clear strategy that separates Shanks and Tilley from processual archaeologists in their main work—*Re-Constructing Archaeology*—is the wide range of sources that inform their work. This stylistic choice provoked much of the harsh reactions to the book. Not only did they borrow from different disciplines of knowledge, such as philosophy, literary

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[231] Robert Smithson, "Conversation with Robert Smithson" [1972], edited by Bruce Kurtz, *Writings*, 266. See also Smithson's unpublished essay, "Art and Dialectics" [1971], *Writings*, 370-1, where he wrote the following epigraph: "Language is the first and last structure of madness. Michel Foucault."

[232] I am referring to *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980 and to *Discipline and Punish*, translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977 [1975].

[233] See for example, *The Unconscious in Culture: The Structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss in Perspective,* ed. Ino Rossi, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974.

criticism, art, literature, anthropology and sociology, but they also borrowed from a wide range of authors of different intellectual movements and positions (e.g., Adorno, Benjamin, Derrida, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Giddens). In the preface to the second edition of the book, Shanks and Tilley acknowledged the criticism to the first edition and responded in the following way:

> We chose to be confrontational, polemical, anti-dogmatic and critical, and not simply as a rhetorical gesture … *We make no apology for this, nor for breaking the rules of conventional archaeological discourse, concerning, for example, the range of work we cite*: there has been criticism of our use of 'literary' writing such as that of Borges.[234]

Without question, the logic of mismatching sources recalls that used by Smithson in *Incidents*. After all both the artist and the archaeologists admit the literary influence of Borges.[235] As much as Smithson borrowed from disparate sources to prove a point, Shanks and Tilley considered their own eclectic sources as tools for thinking through basic questions and issues. Furthermore, on a general level, those questions and issues are fairly close to the ones that Smithson brought up in *Incidents*. Archaeological and artistic practices are both intimately related to matter, be it the leftovers from the past or the materials for art-making. However, Smithson as well as Shanks and Tilley do not consider matter as a given category implying objectivity, identity and presence. Rather, they think of materialism as an activity, a practice conducted in a subjective fashion that implies a wider network of connections in which it is embedded. Relational thinking, or the logic of the mismatch, is therefore

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[234] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, xx. Emphasis mine.

[235] Shanks and Tilley, specifically quote Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Ibid, 15-16. Although Smithson never made explicit references to this text, the volume in which it was published, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952,* was part of his library at the time of his death. Shanks and Tilley extensively quote the text by Borges to support their ideas about recreating the past. Briefly, they use Borges's appreciation of Menard as an author who did not intend to copy the original Quixote, but arrived to him through his personal present route. Likewise, the archaeologists suggest that, as such, they do not intend to relieve the past "as it was" and thus to copying its ways, but to re-create it revealing their authorship in the process of that practice.

indispensable to apprehend connections that escape the boundaries of fixed disciplines as they are expected to be.

There is a downside in the logic of the mismatch, one that reveals the implicit dangers of such a strategy. Smithson's selection of sources reflects contradiction rather than pure eclecticism, or better put, eclecticism leads him to contradiction. In *Incidents* we can detect a split in the way in which the artist acts while displacing the mirrors in Yucatán (inoculate passivity) and writing the essay in New York (active mediation). This split matches the one between Lévi-Strauss's scientific and civilian personas. Whereas Lévi-Strauss consciously tried to separate both roles and thus apologized for his speculative thoughts, when it came to his academic career, Smithson makes no apologies for his behavior because he seems to be *unaware* of the split. Ironically, the willful and unapologetic logic of the mismatch leads Smithson to link different sources and thus think outside the modernist paradigm, but also to contradict himself. At least when he is in the field.

In the process of making his case against the existence of one objective history, Smithson ended up portraying the Mayans as a cultural melting pot, unable to make their own willful choices in a specific historical landscape. Likewise, while detracting the fixed expectations of what artists should do, and therefore counteracting the idea of yet another objective category, Smithson embraced passivity himself. Smithson's complete erasure of will in his own practice, especially while in the Yucatán, meant an erasure of the political relations at stake in that specific scenario, the homeland of the Maya. This split handling of historicity in the "here" and "there" marks the difference between Smithson and Shanks and Tilley in their ultimate use of the logic of the mismatch. While the artist suspends will in

part of his practice, the archaeologists do nothing but highlight their willful choices throughout.

Shanks and Tilley do not separate their notion of what archaeological materialism entails in theory ("desk" practice) and in practice ("field" practice). Nor do they separate their academic and civilian personas. By civilian I mean the aspect of Shanks and Tilley that breaks the rules of conventional archaeological discourse, such as borrowing the literary style of Borges. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, who was terrified of stepping away from scientific territory, Shanks and Tilley deliberately intend to surpass facile dichotomies such as science/humanity, objective/subjective by questioning them altogether. Hence, the very use of sources traditionally foreign to the discipline actually takes archaeology to the next theoretical level. Shanks and Tilley wrote *Re-Constructing Archaeology* thinking through sources and issues already used by Smithson, but under a completely different light. Their critical approach to the ahistorical structuralism of Lévi-Strauss was indeed partly informed by Foucault's microphyisics of power and other sources unavailable to Smithson. In sum, as much as they delved into similar varied sources to tackle similar questions and issues, the practices of Smithson and Shanks and Tilley are the products of very distinct times.

This is not to say that because of its more recent development the postprocessualism of Shanks and Tilley is free of inconsistencies. A major critique, and self-critique, to *Re-Constructing Archaeology* was Shanks's and Tilley's inability to relate their theoretical reflection with concrete applications to the study of the past. As much as the authors opposed scientific methodologies, until very recently, their field experiences did not reflect a major change from what they critiqued. Unlike Smithson, they seem theoretically aware of their political agency while in the field, but yet they were unable to offer a clear methodology to

put it into practice. Furthermore, as an art historian, one could also bring up issues of their simplistic analysis of sources dealing with the visual arts. However, this remains a case of two archaeologists approaching the arts with different mindsets. Unlike Smithson, who could make art only by casting glances (even if he is looking at texts), Shanks and Tilley make archaeology only by casting words (even if they are looking at artworks). That may actually be their difficulty in grounding abstract ideas. A passage of *Incidents* reveals Smithson while casting a glance, which could also be considered a poignant anthropological comment, unlikely to be made by a postprocessual, or any, archaeologist indeed:

> The match boxes in Mexico are odd, they are "things in themselves." While one enjoys a cigarrete, he can look at a yellow box of "Clasicos-De-Lujo-La Central." The match company has thoughtfully put a reproduction of Venus de Milo on the front cover, and a changing array of "fine arts" on the back cover, such as Pedro Brueghel's *The Blind leading the Blind*.[236]

Ironically, as an artist Smithson could more easily materialize his ideas on materialism, such as in his early abstract sculpture that largely preceded his more complex writings. This is the case of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (Fig. 8). As archaeologists, Shanks and Tilley deal with matter (past leftovers), but they do not make matter themselves, except for that in printed form. Only from this perspective, I can agree with Smithson's refusal to view himself as a conceptual artist or with his denied interest in philosophy. Smithson felt a need to explain himself with words, but always in a dialectical mode, without giving up the making of three-dimensional matter or casting glances on matter. From this viewpoint, Shanks's photographic assemblages, performed talks, and interest in metamedia open up a way of incorporating the making of archaeology not only as written text but as three-dimensional matter. But, of course, he came to that conclusion over twenty years after Smithson. Likewise, from a postprocessual perspective it would be desirable to have seen

[236] Smithson, "Incidents," *Writings*, 127.

Smithson realize, forty years ago, that his "anthropological" comment on Mexican matchboxes did not happen randomly.

In sum, the Borgesian armature of the mismatch confronts us with the true possibility of accepting a way of seeing that does not match that of categories already available. In other words, it shatters the structures that hold systems together. Thus, it is worth wondering whether our search for consistency, be it in the arts or in archaeology, follows the grand narratives of what we have been told that embodies consistency. Even if that is the case it might be worthwhile worrying about inconsistencies within "mismatched" programs such as the contradictory passive/active aspect of *Incidents,* and the lack of practical applications of the theory for postprocessualists. One cannot obliterate the historical specificity behind the enantiomorphic effect between Smithson's *Incidents* and Shanks's and Tilley's postprocessualism. Without denying similar conceptual and strategic armatures, the context of each is critical to avoid projecting our own present condition on one another.

The Hero Twins: Smithson and the Postprocessualists

The Hero Quest metaphor brings Smithson's artistic practice in the Yucatán with archaeological fieldwork together. Smithson sought to reveal the artificial pretense of constructing a unified objective history using John Lloyd Stephens's narrative of the Maya as a backdrop for his thesis. By stepping outside that kind of official history, his art practice offered a platform to counteract the positivism of science, which he also saw embedded in the modernist art world. From this perspective, Smithson positioned his anti-modernist art practice and objective science at opposite ends of the spectrum. In *Incidents* he portrayed science as fiction, the only way that he thought of it as possible. Thus, he took the "liberty"

to literally mix disparate types of archaeological and non-archaeological sources in order to stress his active role in constructing the history of his incidents of travel in Yucatán.

Smithson's suitability to the postprocessual archaeology of Shanks and Tilley does not rely on his use of anthropological sources nor on the fact that *Incidents* occurred "elsewhere," in a place where archaeologists often conduct fieldwork and metaphorically reenact the Hero Quest myth. The enantiomorphism between the two is that Shanks and Tilley shared Smithson's desire to counteract the objective pretense of scientific positivism. Unlike Smithson, however, Shanks and Tilley broke with the syntax of traditional archaeological discourse within scientific territory. They used Smithson's logic of the mismatch as well as the omnipresence of language to suggest that archaeology was not an objective science. The production of site reports as mediated documents brings together the ways in which Smithson and the archaeologists approach the fieldwork experience.

The revelation that Smithson uncovered and materialized in *Incidents*, over a decade earlier than the postprocessualists, deems the artist's quest truly heroic. There is a problem nonetheless. In the process of getting out of the nineteenth-century positivist way of thinking Smithson ended up reproducing it. This is evident in his attitude towards the Maya natives and the local landscape, which he considered passive and indifferent, foreign to any type of agency. Such a colonialist rhetoric was only possible due to Smithson's attitude towards his own artistic practice while in Yucatán. Because he stepped outside the modernist coordinates that he was critiquing, he thought he had also stepped outside the power relations embedded in (art or any mode of) practice at large. Thus, he did not care much for the history that he constructed in Yucatán (or outside the gallery space), only for one that emulated that of Stephens (as the epitome of modern history) in the form of the site report.

Had Smithson not brought the colonialism of Stephens onto the table, his obliviousness towards the Maya and the landscape would not be so significant. Moreover, his misreading of the Yucatán natives would be almost insignificant compared to the misreading of his own practice. After all, he was not an anthropologist like Claude Lévi-Strauss, who also championed the split colonialist/relativist behavior. The question that follows, then, is whether we can ever get out of nineteenth-century frameworks of thought and action. As far as the social sciences go, I subscribe to Quetzil Castañeda's thesis of "the inextricability of (nationalist and other modes of) politics/power strategies in the scientific production of knowledge."[237] Thus, self-reflexivity will not delete the colonial root of anthropology and archaeology, but it offers multiple ethics and criteria by which to practice and contest it. Back to Smithson, what really is at stake in his Yucatán incidents is the complete omission of political complicity with his "passive" practice at large. Thus, he should not have been more aware of the Maya's agency than of that of the inhabitants of New Jersey and New York, including himself.

The very choice of the Yucatán as a backdrop for Smithson's heroic quest reveals how he could not find an example of an objectively constructed history within the limits of his hometown. Throughout his work, Smithson approached prehistory as the past that precedes humankind or as the very recent one. The prehistoric past of ancient humanity located in between was always found elsewhere: in Rome, in the Nazca Lines, or in Stonehenge. This is not a problem exclusive to him as it is to Americans, who have built a cultural identity devoid from any links with a Native American past. Thus, Smithson's critique of nineteenth-century expeditions could have never taken place in New Jersey because there are no records of the sort. In 1839, New Jersey native John Lloyd Stephens

[237] Castañeda, *In the Museum*, 283.

was one among many East coast early explorers who decided to go abroad instead of investigating and plundering the archaeological remains of their local neighborhoods. Leone uses this self-inflicted denial of a native past to interpret the lag of postprocessual historical awareness between the United States and England. That is Shanks and Tilley's heroic contribution to the quest.

Since his accidental death in 1973, Robert Smithson became an archaeological ruin himself leaving his work open for interpretation. Ironically, his contradictory behavior in the "here" and "there" attests to the kind of past that Shanks and Tilley believe in, one that is not simple but contradictory and fluid.

Chapter 3. Analysis:
Mark Dion

> …today's actions have lingering consequences. Nothing that is thrown away ever goes away.
> Mark Dion[238]

Introduction

Smart, green, eco-agitprop, social activism, Conceptual, post-Conceptual, critical, post-critical, site-specific, post-site-specific, poetic, postmodern. These are some of the categories with which reviewers, students, and critics have classified the nearly twenty-year art production of Mark Dion since 1986.[239] Dion is aware of it to the point of saying that it "seems extremely important as an artist to present a moving target, because once you become classified, it's possible to place you on the shelf. And that is an extremely difficult location to speak from."[240] Years working with representations of nature put Dion on the shelf as "the artist who works on themes of zoology," and led him to work with representations of culture by borrowing the methodology of archaeology.[241] Almost ten years after branching out, Dion laughs at the inevitable: he is now categorized as the "archaeology guy."[242]

Considering Dion's awareness of the ideological power embedded in classifications, it comes as no surprise that a common thread throughout his work, regardless of the target

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[238] Denise Markonish, "Interview," *Mark Dion New England Digs*, curated by Denise Markonish, Brockton: Fuller Art Museum, 2001, 28.
[239] See for example, Jan Avgikos, "Green Piece," *Artforum* (April 1991): 104-110; Isabelle Graw, "Site Specifics," *Flash Art*, vol.23, nº155 (1990): 137; Dan Cameron "Culture in Action: Eliminate the Middleman," *Flash Art*, vol.26, nº173 (1993): 62-3; Grady T. Turner "Mark Dion at Fine Arts," *Art in America* (May 1996): 107; Lisa G. Corrin, "A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderful History of Nature," *Mark Dion*, eds. Lisa G. Corrin, Miwon Kwon and Norman Bryson, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997, 38-87; Michael Shanks, "Hybrid Art and Science," review of *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 12 (2002): 171-3.
[240] Alex Coles, "Field Work and The Natural History Museum, Mark Dion Interview," The Optic of Walter Benjamin, *De-, Dis-, Ex-*. vol. 3 (1999): 55.
[241] Miwon, Kwon, "Conversation with Mark Dion," *Mark Dion*, eds. Lisa G. Corrin, Miwon Kwon and Norman Bryson, London: Phaidon, 1997, 29-30.
[242] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

that he is presenting, is the classificatory process itself.[243] Dion's detour to archaeology from the natural world is by no means a dramatic shift of focus. Whether it is the representation of animals or material culture, he is interested in the anthropomorphic component behind classifications. In this chapter, I discuss two of Dion's projects directly related with the representations of and from archaeology: the *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999, and the *New England Digs*, 2001. Both deal with virtually every stage of the archaeological process (fieldwork, analysis and display), but for *analytical* purposes I focus on the one of analysis only. My own need to narrow down his work and put it into a category within this dissertation exemplifies the Western (both art historical and scientific) need to put order into a world that seems chaotic to us. My analytic categories therefore may not necessarily reflect the categories managed by Dion.

If we are to understand the archaeological process in a linear fashion, analysis comes after retrieving information in the field. In that sense, this chapter further explores themes that I touched only superficially in the preceding one "Fieldwork: Robert Smithson." Mark Dion is part of a group of artists that is indebted to Smithson and his contemporaries, and became known in the art world well after his predecessor's death. Due to this historical change of generation, the incongruence between what was going on in the visual arts and in the social sciences in the 1960s no longer holds true in the 1980s. Dion's reflexive and critical practice takes place concurrently with the self-reflexive era in archaeology. Although

[243] For an itinerary of Dion's targets, see the two more thorough surveys of his work: Lisa G. Corrin, "A Natural History," and Natacha Pugnet, "Mark Dion: Tales of the Grotesque and the Grave," *Mark Dion Presents The Ichthyosaurus The Magpie and Other Marvels of The Natural World*, Musée Gassendi Le Cairn, 2003, 95-110. In a playful way, the essay by Pugnet attempts a deliberate and often self-called "corrupted" classification of Dion's own work differentiating the themes and categories of interest to him: "décor as art," "scientific fictions," "the paradigm of the wheelbarrow," "our animal friends."

Dion does not seem to anticipate any theoretical trend in archaeology, as was the case with Smithson, he does manage to approach archaeology in ways different from archaeologists.

In the following pages I explore Dion's critique of classificatory systems by borrowing the methodology of archaeology and explicitly displaying *the process* of laboratory analysis as an "object" itself. I am interested in the points in which Dion's representation of the archaeological process coincide or collide with the ones that practicing archaeologists choose to represent themselves. I am also interested in the impact that Dion's classifications have in the audience regarding their construction and reproduction of historical identity. Dion is an American visual artist; these credentials are key to understanding his approach to archaeology and to the past. Prior to delving into Mark Dion's projects, one must understand where his archaeological interests come from in order to position his work within the trajectory of archaeological thought and practice.

Mapping Mark Dion

Mark Dion was born in 1961, the same year in which Robert Smithson produced a series of religious paintings while declaring that he wanted to be a pre-Renaissance artist.[244] Within the next twelve years Smithson successfully devised a dialectics that allowed him to switch back and forth between the official (Renaissance) and unofficial (pre-Renaissance) limits of the art world. Smithson's dialectical model has proved to be not completely detached from Renaissance-like ideas, rather it unfolds as a perfect example of the artist's own contradictions that combine both worldviews. Mark Dion understands this, and his own

[244] See Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, 13-14.

critique of the limits of an official Renaissance-like art world not only builds on Smithson's earlier struggle but also supersedes it.

Dion recognizes the heritage of the former generation of artists whose work flourished in the 1960s, particularly the one of Smithson. In an interview he stated:

> I'm interested in artists who have expanded the definition of art and enriched the field by looking outside of it. Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Smithson, Joseph Beuys, Joseph Cornell, Gordon Matta-Clark … the dead guys. That's my pantheon. Smithson is of particular interest because he forged a convergence between geology, the science of time, and critical art discourse … his practice made art very expansive.[245]

The impact of Smithson's expansive work on that of Dion has been noted by several of his reviewers. Conceptually, they all agree on the impact of Smithson's interest in the natural sciences and in the museum as the trope where Dion chooses to objectify and critique the representation of nature.[246] Moreover, Dion employs a methodology similar to Smithson's site/non-site dialectic to advance the critique. Most of Dion's installations involve material brought from different locations to the gallery space and in that sense they have formally been compared to Smithson's nonsites. But unlike his forerunner, Dion elaborates further with the materials in the installation and assigns equal importance to each stage of the process (site, nonsite, and the displacement from one to the other). Miwon Kwon has articulated the relationship in detail:

> … Whereas Smithson's geographical and geological displacements of natural resources functioned primarily as metonymic signifiers of physically distant real 'sites', almost like souvenirs, Dion's displacements highlight the very process of such displacements and their role in the formation of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, while Smithson's Site/Non-Site projects created

[245] Miwon, Kwon, "Conversation," 19.

[246] Both Smithson and Dion share a passion for the museum of Natural History, which actually occupies a central trope in the artwork of each. For Smithson's relation to the natural sciences see Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History As Nonsite," *October* 45 (1988): 109-27, and Robert Smithson, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art," conducted by Paul Cummings, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996, 270-96.

> disjunctive mental maps of spatial relations, highlighting the gap between life of the 'site' and the atemporal stasis of the exhibition (art) space, Dion foregrounds his own actions as the bridge between this gap.[247]

Dion's work could be considered an explicit afterthought to Smithson's nonsites, one that is truly dialectical and at the same time didactic.[248] Didacticism, however, should not be understood as preaching a message, but as the explicit nature of his work. There is no room for metaphors regarding the processes that come along with science, since Dion reenacts those procedures through performance. Using scientific language in such a direct way enables him to advance a more pragmatic style than Smithson and his contemporaries.[249] Dion is actively committed to educate the audience and make a difference in the social fabric that he is critiquing.[250] His installations often raise questions about the institutions where they are located, such as in *Birds of Antwerp* or *Teatro Mundi - Cambridge (or Natural History and Other Fictions at Birmingham)*, or provide the institution with tools to expand their limits, such as in *Project for the Belize Zoo* and *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*. This active thrust is a major difference with Smithson's conscious and sometimes unconscious passivity. While Smithson was selectively aware of his political standing, Dion includes himself within the contested landscape in a more democratic fashion.

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[247] Miwon Kwon, "Unnatural Tendencies: Scientific Guises of Mark Dion," *Natural History and Other Fictions: An Exhibition by Mark Dion*, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1997, 40. For other references to Smithson's nonsites in the work of Dion that share, if not depart from, Kwon's point, see John Leslie, "Among the Naturalists," *Natural History and Other Fictions*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1997, 9-10; Corrin, "A Natural History," 50-1; Iain A. Boal, "Both Limbs of the Fork: Nature and Artifice on the West Coast," *Mark Dion: Where the Land Meets the Sea*, San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 1998-99, 6; Alex Coles, "The Epic Archaeological Digs of Mark Dion," *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, eds. Alex Coles and Mark Dion, European Union: Blackdog Publishers, 1999, 28; Pugnet, "Tales of the Grotesque,"102.

[248] I think that Smithson did not just simply conceive of the nonsite as a configuration of material from the site in the gallery. Rather, I believe he considered further implications of such a substitution, although in implicit terms only. The equal importance to both site and nonsite represents a step further from Smithson's obliteration of the Yucatán experience *in situ*, to name only one.

[249] See, for example, Joshua Decter "Mark Dion at Metropole," *Artforum* (January 1995): 96.

[250] This pedagogic interest in Dion's work aligns itself better with the one of Joseph Beuys, as noted by Corrin, "A Natural History," 49. Likewise, Dion admitted the appeal of Walter Benjamin's work due to its "bond between an intellectual critical response and a political commitment." Coles, "Field Work," 40-41

Dion is fully aware of the conscious differences between his generation and that of his "pantheon." This distance is crucial to explore his relation to the kind of cultural critique that he is advancing as well as to the readings of his own work. When asked why he shifted from an early phase of art institutional critique, characteristic of the former generation, to the trope of the Natural History and Ethnographic Museums, Dion responded:

> Because of their repetitive type of game play, at one point it seemed as if these practices were heralding a new kind of formalism … Already, artists like Haacke were art history by the time we were studying (he had also moved on from these critiques), and it became a question of looking at other sites and asking 'bigger' questions.
> … As much as I identify with some of it [conceptualist practice], it really apes a scientific sociological proceeding without any type of criticality towards its methods; or even the basic notion that asking a very particular question is going to direct your methods of finding out the answer to that question. It is also not very self-reflexive about just producing another 'truth'…[251]

This deeper self-reflexivity is prompted by the availability of a wider selection of writings on cultural critique at large. It is no longer so much about intuitively applying poststructuralist models, such as Foucault's archaeology, to different disciplines, as was the case for Smithson and his peers, but about reading specific critiques already well thought-out within specialized fields. Likewise, the authors who were considered "hot" readings in the 1960s and 1970s have now been put into perspective. Not only are there revisionist approaches to the work of Foucault, Barthes, and Lévi-Strauss, but those authors themselves moved on from what they had written in former decades, producing critiques of their own work.[252]

Unlike Smithson, who was a self-taught artist, Dion received formal training at the University of Hartford, the School of Visual Arts in New York and the Whitney Independent Study Program, also in New York. As Dion recalls from his experience at the Whitney

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[251] Coles, "Field Work," 46.
[252] See for example, Christopher Tilley, ed. *Reading Material Culture: Structuralism, Hermeneutics and Post-Structuralism*, Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, where critiques of thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Foucault are put forward as well as an analysis of the development of each author's thinking.

Program: "There were staple texts which were read in almost every seminar each semester … the introduction to *The Order of Things*, some essays from the 1970s British film theory—works by Roland Barthes, Edward Said and Walter Benjamin."[253] These readings revolved around the problematic of presenting the "truth," a major topic of discussion during those years. Among his seminar leaders and advisors were Hal Foster, Douglas Crimp, Benjamin Buchloh, and Craig Owens, all of them associated with the October group. These scholars were responsible for placing Smithson and his contemporaries within the grand narrative of art history.[254] As much as this type of postmodern/Marxist critique illuminated Smithson's work, it also helped obscure his central contradictions. Dion's analysis of the staple texts at the Whitney Program then, could have been conditioned, if not tainted, by the bias of the October group critics.

Dion did not passively absorb the training by his Whitney advisors and leaders. On the contrary, he has asserted how artists have a very different way of approaching theory from art historians (his advisors) or academics in general:

> … artists tend to use critical theory in a pragmatic mix-and-match method. They use what works and discard the contradictions.
> … Artists are interested in illustrating theories as much as they may be in testing them. This is why artists may choose to ignore contradictions in a text, or may choose to explode those contradictions … Critics improve the tools [theories], artists improve their application.[255]

Dion's statement brings us back to the point where we left Smithson in the former chapter. This different approach to theory, and the theory as art historians knew it, led Dion to explore

[253] Coles, "Field Work," 40. Among the works by Benjamin, Dion cites "The Author as Producer" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
[254] In fact, the postmodernist reading of Smithson's work is to a great extent due to Craig Owens. See Craig Owens, "Photography en Abyme," *October* 5 (1978): 73-88, and "Earthwords," *October* 10 (1979): 121-130.
[255] Coles, "Field Work," 39-40.

the problematics of presenting the truth from outside what he deemed "the slick world of Conceptual and media-based art of the early 1980s."[256]

A long-term passion for biology plus an interest in cultural studies at large, led the artist to pursue the study of nature as a source for critical and artistic investigation. Although Dion remembers that natural history writing was extremely uncritical in the mid 1980s, he discovered the work of Stephen Jay Gould, which proved to be exceptional and particularly illuminating. In Dion's words:

> Here was someone [Gould] applying the same critical criterion implicit in the art I aspired to make—which can loosely be described as Foucaultian—to problems in the reception of evolutionary biology. It became very clear to me that nature is one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology. Once I realized that, the wall between my two worlds dissolved. [257]

In addition to Gould's, the work of Alexander Wilson and Donna Haraway also made an impact on Dion, since they all shared a view of the environmental crisis as being fundamentally a crisis of culture. Thus, Dion found a common ground to bring together his passion for nature, critical cultural studies, and his practice as an artist working with issues of visual representation. As Corrin has noted, Dion "remains convinced that the representational act is an ethically responsible contribution to furthering both theoretical discourse and environmental activism."[258]

Considering Dion's critical genealogy, the similarity between his work and the one of postprocessual archaeologists, such as Shanks and Tilley, is less surprising than the archaeologists' affinity with Smithson. First of all, Shanks, Tilley, and Dion are historically coeval, sharing the early 1980s widespread interest in cultural critique. In *Re-Constructing*

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[256] Kwon, "Conversation," 8.
[257] Coles, "Field Work," 9. Among the books by Gould read by Dion was *The Flamingo Smile*, as documented by Lisa G. Corrin in "A Natural History," 47.
[258] Corrin, "A Natural History," 48.

Archaeology, Shanks and Tilley not only cite many of the texts and authors that were staple readings at the Whitney Program, but their reading of them comes from a similar direction.[259] As Dion loosely describes his art practice as Foucaultian, the same could be said about the work of Shanks and Tilley. Unlike Smithson, they all seem to go beyond the archaeological model that pinpoints the genealogy of Western disciplines, incorporating Foucault's political concern for the microphysics of power that extends to his own contemporary practice. The fact that Dion has not read postprocessual archaeological theory *per se* does not prevent him from having a critical approach to the discipline of archaeology, or to his own. Because anthropological and archaeological self-critiques ultimately reveal a crisis in culture, the underlying object of the critique is what brings Dion and postprocessualists together.

Dion's reading of Gould could be regarded as a substitute for the postprocessual critical approach to archaeology. Although natural rather than social, biology shares the scientific component of archaeology. Furthermore, be it biology or archaeology, Dion is interested in the cultural management of each discipline. The problem has always been culture as revealed in Dion's early work *Artful History: A Restoration Comedy*, of 1986, where he questions the practices of art conservation. Dion's approach to biology, however, is much deeper and theoretical than his approach to archaeology. Works such as *Tropical Rainforest Preserves* (with William Schefferine) of 1989 or *The Delirium of Alfred Russel Wallace*, of 1994, denote careful and specific research that is not present in the archaeological projects, as we will see in the next section. Dion does not recognize an influential scholar such as Gould for archaeology:

[259] The cited works by Benjamin include "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." They also cite Foucault's *The Order of Things*, as well as works by Edward Said, and Roland Barthes. Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987].

> I think the critical reassessment of archaeology in the 90s, they are reading the same material that you are reading if you are working with literary criticism or art criticism … that makes it possible for us to talk together. Major people like Foucault and James Clifford I think are shared by a lot of people. But certainly I'm not reading field reports, I'm not going through archaeological journals. If I am taking something from archaeology it is the kind of archaeology that comes through critical theory. [260]

Being more or less well versed in specific disciplinary matters is not the main point. I am, in fact, more interested in Dion's approach to archaeology as an artist and so is he: "The tactical element of what I do in terms of a strategy in art production is to use fictional characters to discuss 'real' material situations and documentary practice."[261] Dion's approach to archaeology comes from a similar direction as Smithson's, one that is not of the specialist, it is actually "often less about what contemporary archaeologists do than what the uninformed public think they do." [262] This key element defines Dion's ability to mount a portrayal of archaeology not necessarily foreseen by contemporary archaeologists. As the artist notes:

> it's interesting to me to think about what archaeologists get out of my work, because I think they read it as a critique in a very particular kind of way and that is not exactly what I intend to do. I don't really think I'm challenging, critiquing the way that they are practicing archaeology today as much as maybe a relationship to material culture that includes archaeology but it's really more general.[263]

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[260] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA. Dion knows Meskell and Renfrew personally and has read part of their work, such as Lynn Meskell, *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004 and Colin Renfrew, *Figuring it Out: Where are we? Where do we come from? The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. It must be stated that Renfrew's book greatly differs from his previous scholarly work on cognitive archaeology.

[261] Mark Dion, "Mark Dion," *True Stories*, curated by Iwona Blazwick and Emma Dexter, London: ICA 1992, 9.

[262] Markonish, "Interview," 21.

[263] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

Dion's remark on the divide between the ways in which artists and art historians approach theory—pragmatic and intellectual—places archaeologists by default among the latter, within the academic world. Despite the tangible aspects involved in the production of knowledge about the past, archaeologists still largely approach material matters intellectually. The material consequences of archaeological practice, although existent and sometimes acknowledged, are usually hidden from public view playing no role in reports, lectures or publications. Dion's approach to archaeology as a sculpture-oriented artist enables him to disclose some of those intimate practices and make them worthy to be looked at as material entities. Building on Smithson's initial and tangential references to archaeological practice, Dion fully understands that it is not so much about working with the past as it is about working with the present. Or, that the present can also be treated under the scope of material matters. This is the story he tells in his archaeological projects.

Classification in Archaeology: The Practice of Everyday Life

A Digless Dig

During the summer of 1999, Mark Dion could be seen in full archaeological gear on the banks of the Thames River in central London (Fig. 20). A year away from opening its Modern addition, the Tate Gallery invited the artist to propose a project to celebrate the creation of the new building. Dion gave life to the *Tate Thames Dig*, a multi-stage project that echoes archaeological research. The first stage contemplated the recovery of material remains from two sites on opposite banks of the Thames, one in Millbank, near the "old" Tate, and the other in Bankside, near the "new" Tate. The second stage comprised the analysis of the finds in tents located on the lawn of the upcoming Modern Tate. Finally, the

last stage included the display of the organized remnants along with other material components of the first two stages of the project in Art Now at the Tate Gallery at Millbank. A series of related events such as lectures and field trips were scheduled throughout that summer to complement the exhibit.

Dion's project at the Thames built on his former "digs" at Fribourg (*History Trash Dig*, 1995) and Venice (*History Trash Scan*, 1996). Because these projects were the first to represent a variation from Dion's work on representations of nature, they received less scholarly attention.[264] From the Thames project onwards that situation changed. Interestingly, among those writing about Dion's dig projects are professional archaeologists such as Colin Renfrew, Michael Shanks, Leah Rosenmeier, and Cornelius Holtorf.[265] Renfrew was particularly involved with the Thames project, acting as consultant, public lecturer, and author of essays.[266] He was intrigued by Dion's ability to subtly raise disquieting questions about the boundaries between science and art. Moreover, he was quite comfortable crisscrossing those boundaries and wondering what archaeologists really do. When it came to define what Dion was really doing, however, Renfrew made it very clear that "gathering curiosities from the foreshore is really just beachcombing, " not modern archaeology.[267] Renfrew was right; Dion did not follow a systematic procedure to collect the

[264] See brief references in Corrin, "A Natural History."
[265] Colin Renfrew, "It May Be Art But Is It Archaeology? Science as Art and Art as Science," *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, eds. Alex Coles and Mark Dion, European Union: Black Dog Publishing, 1999, 12-23; Leah Rosenmeier, "Categories of Cognition and Past Human Worlds," *Mark Dion New England Digs*, 16-19; Shanks, "Hybrid Art and Science;" Cornelius Holtorf, "Archäologie als Spurensicherung," *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, eds. Knut Ebeling and Stefan Altekamp, Frankfurt: Fisher, 2004, 306-24, and Cornelius Holtorf, "Chapter 4: Interpreting Traces," *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, forthcoming.
[266] Renfrew's lecture was part of the related events scheduled by the Tate Gallery. On July 20, 1999, he spoke on "Archaeology, Interpretation and Art: The Status of the Discovered Object." In addition, he contributed with an essay in a publication devoted to Dion's archaeological projects edited by the artist and Alex Coles ("It May Be Art"). In his recent publication "Figuring it Out," Renfrew extensively wrote about the relationships between art and archaeology, devoting a lengthy section on the work of Dion.
[267] Colin Renfrew, "It May be Art," 14.

objects that he later classified and displayed nor did he recover them from secure stratigraphic contexts. And if we want to be extremely purist, he never dug anything nor did he do so in the Venice dig. But this is what his work is about, using fiction to talk about the "real." A digless dig is therefore the ultimate irony of the fake endeavor.

As I mentioned earlier, the present discussion centers exclusively on the second stage of Dion's project: analysis. In popular culture, this is definitely the least attractive of all stages in the archaeological process. While fieldwork may involve trips to exotic locations that culminate in grand excavations, analysis usually takes place indoors—in the laboratory, ruling out the very fabrication of myths of prowess and adventure. And if there is no exotic destination, but a destination, the outdoors setting helps mitigate the meticulous and tedious practices that come along with the field experience. In the laboratory, by contrast, all that remains is the meticulous and the tedious. Within the discipline of archaeology this romantic view of the profession does not hold true; many archaeologists are not even field oriented, restricting their job to working indoors. Moreover, analysis itself is not an activity exclusive to the laboratory; it starts in the field when the collected materials are subject to preliminary organization for further and more detailed analysis in the lab. Laboratory analysis therefore involves more refined classificatory procedures that seek to understand better the material.

At the heart of the analytical process lies classification. Although classifications aim to establish patterns in order to make comparison possible, they vary in degree of complexity. According to a standard introductory textbook on archaeology, the objectives of classification include organizing data into manageable units, describing types, identifying relations between types, and studying assemblage variability in the archaeological record.[268]

[268] Brian M. Fagan, *In the Beginning: An Introduction to Archaeology*, Upper Saddler River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.

A type consists of a "grouping of artifacts based on form, chronology, function or style. … Typology enables archaeologists to construct arbitrarily defined units of analysis that apply to two or more samples of artifacts, so that these samples can be compared objectively."[269] In the 1960s, processual archaeology advanced the use of quantitative techniques, such as statistical and numerical analysis, to improve the quality of analytical procedures. This set of techniques allowed hypothesis testing while securing a firmer backdrop between data and interpretations made out of it.

Classifications are methodological tools created by investigators as operational units. What constitutes a point of contention within the discipline, however, is the quickness with which archaeologists forget, or fail to make public, that classifications are indeed arbitrary. Ian Hodder has discussed this amnesia in relation to the definition of layers in controlled stratigraphic excavations:

> once the decision has been taken to lump lenses into a layer or to split a layer into smaller lenses or layers, *it is assumed that the further description of stratigraphic units is objective and routine*. The identification of the layer (or unit, context, locus, or spit) is the primary building block of the recording process in archaeology. It is according to these units that artifacts are retrieved, soils recorded and analysis and comparison undertaken.[270]

Hodder's point is relevant because it places analytical categories within a hermeneutic flux. Classifications not only provide a platform for further interpretation, they also depart from and are in themselves interpretations. Being laboratory analysis a practice hidden from view and public scrutiny can only strengthen the archaeologist's difficulty to expose the arbitrariness of his/her classificatory methods. In the *Tate Thames Dig*, Mark Dion undermined the illusion of stability in archaeological analysis in two different ways. On the

[269] Ibid, 229-30.
[270] Ian Hodder, *The Archaeological Process: An Introduction*, Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, 108-9. Emphasis mine.

one hand, he literally turned the lab inside out by installing a field centre for everyone to see, and on the other hand, he classified many items that due to their recent origins tend not to be regarded under fixed categories, making their arbitrariness more evident. Rather than exploring each strategy at length, I discuss the elements in Dion's sensibility as an artist that enable these strategies to exist, and that tend to be absent in the sensibilities of the archaeological world.

Fake, Humorous, and Private

From July 19 through August 13 of 1999, white tents were laid out on the South Lawn of the soon-to-be Modern Tate at Bankside. What Alex Coles described as evocative of a customary scene of scientific expeditions in colonial lands, was actually the Field Center of Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* (Fig. 21).[271] With the assistance of local volunteers Dion analyzed the finds recently recovered from days of beachcombing the banks of the Thames. The tents were open to the public from Monday through Friday 12pm-6pm and had specific purposes. Two of them housed the findings from each site, Millbank and Bankside, where they were subject to cleaning and classification, and Tent A served as "an interpretation centre to document progress of the project."[272]

To archaeologists such as Renfrew and Shanks, and critics such as Coles and Birnbaum, the most valuable aspect of Dion's project is its performative component. The performative strategy stems from earlier works dealing with natural sciences, such as *The N.Y. Bureau of Tropical Conservation*, and *The Department of Marine Animal Identification*, both of 1992. In all of them, Dion spent time working—or performing, with material brought

[271] Alex Coles, "Mark Dion," *Parachute* 98 (2000): 64.
[272] Robert Williams, "Disjecta Reliquiae the Tate Thames Dig," *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, eds. Dion and Coles, 84.

to the galleries for the audience to see. At the Tate, Dion and his assistants were circulating in white coats while working in the Field Center mounted in the gallery's lawn. The accent on live performance revealed that Dion's interest in the archaeology of the Thames lay equally, if not more, in the ways in which he obtained and worked through the findings, than in the results of those findings.

By performing activities natural to the archaeologist, Dion brought a daily and usually hidden practice in archaeologists's lives to public eye and scrutiny. While doing so, Dion also revealed a stage of his own artistic process making the borders of what constitutes scientific and artistic practice unclear. As Shanks comments:

> In the mimesis, the mimicry of field and curatorial practices … there is a disquieting slippage from amateur to the professional (so too in the collaboration with professional specialists), from simulated to real (it is all very real) ... This mobilization of the figure of the simulacrum (so real it is hyper real, maybe better than the original) is what disturbs and prompts the reflexion [of Renfrew and Coles][273]

The mimicry of Dion's work with archaeological practice prompts the untrained eye to think of it as science, but because the Field Center was set up in an art context and presented as the work of an artist, its reception was conditioned in such a direction. Naomi Beckwith, one of more than a dozen volunteers in the project, expressed that "many people left receptive to the idea of how this project can be classified as 'art', refreshed by experiencing a real life demonstration of art with which one could interact and touch."[274] Conversely, to those who are experts in archaeological practice, the resemblance of Dion's project to reality is not an issue. As certain as they are that it is not modern archaeology, Dion's project prompts them to think of it as art. Moreover, it incites archaeologists to think the purpose of Dion's art imitating life, their lives.

[273] Shanks, "Hybrid Art and Science," 173.
[274] Naomi Beckwith, "Tide Marked," *Museums Journal* (September1999): 25.

Dion has no interest in debating whether the project, or what parts of the project, are art or science; he is a self-proclaimed dilettante. Dion knows that the illusion, or sometimes confusion, lies in *us*, the audience, be it professional, amateur, or plain observant:

> The performative aspect of the archaeology projects … is quite complex since I do not really convincingly develop the character of the expert. I never disguise the fact that I am an artist, working with a methodology borrowed from another field. The fact that the situation often develops in ways it is difficult for me to control, is part of the implicit interrogation of the issue of expertise … I never take on the mantel of mastery in these projects. It is always obvious that I am a dilettante struggling to find my way. As you know, the tone set at a dig is pretty irreverent despite the serious labor involved. So there is a strong performative aspect but there is no illusion.[275]

The appeal of the recourse of dilettantism resides in its ability to trigger a set of implicit cultural expectations associated with what archaeology and art are supposed to be, only to crush them. According to Dion "some of the greatest contributions in art and science have come from dilettantes rather than professionals."[276] Dion's distance from archaeology as a specialized field is what successfully enables him to objectify the stage of archaeological analysis through performance.

Dion's dilettantism touches upon a deeper issue than merely exposing the unknown to the public. It took an artist, not an archaeologist, to bring the archaeological process to visual and public center stage. Dion notes that a fundamental difference between archaeologists and himself is that "even if scientists are good at what they do, they're not necessarily adept in the field of representation. They don't have access to the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humor, which are the meat and potatoes of art and literature."[277] To some extent Dion is right. Since archaeology's self-critique in the 1980s, archaeologists have increasingly become adept in the field of representation. They realized that they do not

[275] Markonish, "Interview," 36.
[276] Kwon, "Conversation," 26-9.
[277] Kwon, "Conversation," 11.

present but *re*-present the past on the basis of its remnants. However, archaeologists do not necessarily share Dion's strategies to undertake that self-critique. While some draw from literary and artistic sources using irony, allegory and humor, they lack Dion's natural inclination to give three-dimensional form to what he sees with distance.

Christopher Tilley is one of the few archaeologists who explicitly uses humor in archaeology. He advocates for the "joke principle," as one of the five main elements of his "alternative theory of reading" archaeological discourse designed to "facilitate a greater degree of criticism, debate and self-reflexivity" within archaeological practice.[278] In Tilley's words, the joke principle:

> Should be an attempt (which will always fail to a certain degree) to bracket-off the self from what is being read, a creation of distance. Paradoxically, in order to understand and take it seriously it needs to be provisionally regarded as complete nonsense or at the very least something that should not be taken seriously. In order to effect this the text read can be taken as a joke. The first thing we do to the text is to laugh at its claims to say anything serious or meaningful about the world.[279]

Tilley's alternative theory of reading translates to an alternative mode of writing archaeology that is also apparent in the work of Shanks, as in the collaborations between the two.[280] The humorous spin of these works lies less in the use of plain ironic language than in thinking that the positivistic scientific way of practicing archaeology is not the only way to take the past seriously. Shanks and Tilley as well as other archaeologists employ tools usually foreign

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[278] Christopher Tilley, "On Modernity and Archaeological Discourse," *Archaeology after Structuralism: Post-Structuralism and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. Ian Bapty and Tim Yates, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 147-8.
[279] Ibid., 148.
[280] The same essay where Tilley proposes this theory is a good example of humorous writing. On an earlier section he writes an ironic "little history of [Anglo-American] archaeological modernity" (130-6), and elsewhere he has analyzed the genre of the Cambridge inaugural lectures from a similar perspective. Shanks, on the other hand, writes with less overt recourses of humor, but incorporates visual material onto his texts that are humorous. This is the case of his photomontages in *Experiencing the Past*. This different way of approaching humor may be due to different personal interests. While Shanks seems more drawn to the visual arts, Tilley seems more interested in the humanities. At any rate, they both find alternative methods in places outside from traditional, purely scientific, archaeological practice.

to a scientific context, be they sources (Pearson and Shanks: performance art), writing styles (Shanks and Tilley: literary), object of study (Holtorf and Meskell: pop culture), or information not traditionally shared outside the field or laboratory stages of the archaeological process (Tilley, Hamilton, and Bender: scribbles from field journals).[281] As in Dion's *Tate Thames Dig*, these works bare a disquieting slippage from traditional archaeologist to something else (e.g. creative writer, literary critic, art critic); they prompt many to think: it may be …(something else)... but is it archaeology?

Archaeologists such as Tilley and others share Dion's way of using humor not as a facile end in itself, but as a strategy to open a door to the unspoken, ugly, and scary. Dion is in fact nothing but respectful for the scientific professions:

> I would never try to devalue the efforts of biologists, anthropologists or archaeologists, while I often attempt to question the political and social ramifications of their work … Archaeology is, of course, automatically more deeply tangled in a web of ideology since it takes as its starting point material culture.[282]

Dion's critique of culture through archaeology may be humorous at first, but it is very serious. Not only in the respectful attitude of the artist, but in the depth of the political and social issues at stake. They are so serious that if it weren't for the humorous coat that Dion skillfully adds to them, the feeling of loss and despair would be insurmountable.[283]

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[281] Pearson and Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*; Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*; Cornelius Holtorf, *From Stonehenge* ; Lynn Meskell, *Object Worlds*; Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton and Christopher Tilley, "Leskernick: Stone Worlds; Alternative Narratives; Nested Landscapes," *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* vol. 63 (1997) 147-178., and Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender, "Art and the Re-Presentation of the Past", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Archaeology*, vol. 6, nº1 (March 2000) 35-62.

[282] Markonish, "Interview," 21.

[283] This mix of a poignant cultural critique and use of humor was championed in Smithson's artwork, adding one more facet to Dion's artistic lineage. Smithson once declared: "Here we go again, creating objects, creating systems, building a better tomorrow. I posit that there is no tomorrow, nothing but a gap, a yawning gap. That seems sort of tragic, but what immediately relieves is irony, which gives you a sense of humor. It is that cosmic sense of humor that makes it all tolerable." Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. (Patsy) Norvell" [1969], *Writings*, 195.

Paraphrasing Smithson, to Dion there is nothing "archaeological" about archaeology.[284] The hidden archaeological practices such as analysis may seem irrelevant routine to the public and some archaeologists, but they are major sources of ideological power. Humor allows Dion to objectify the notion that the archaeologist arbitrarily imposes classifications today, not in the archaeological past under investigation.

Birnbaum notes the connection between Dion's work at the Thames and the widespread critical fascination with classificatory systems in Borges, Bataille and Foucault.[285] Indeed, a point of union between the 60s generation of artists, that of Dion, *and* some postprocessualists is Foucault's *The Order of Things*. Foucault opens the book narrating his laughter while reading a passage from *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins* by Jorge Luis Borges, where he describes a "certain Chinese Encyclopedia" with a quite unorthodox classification of animals.[286] What Foucault found so humorous about it was that it "shattered … all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought."[287] Humor enables Dion to look at the classification process in archaeology and to its resulting types as artifacts themselves. In addition, his expertise in visual representation makes these artifacts not only ideologically, but also visually provoking. There is an aspect of Dion's work that gives visual dignity and recognition to the materiality of archaeological analysis.

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[284] I am referring to Smithson's quote "there's nothing 'natural' about the Museum of Natural History. 'Nature' is simply another 18th-and 19th-century fiction." Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" [1968], *Writings*, 85.

[285] Daniel Birnbaum, "Stream of Conscience," *Artforum* (November 1999): 117-121. In the realm of the American visual arts, this fascination with classifications can be tracked down to the 1960s. Artists were building on earlier models such as Duchamp, Dada and the surrealists. Dion and his peers are most notably indebted to Smithson and Marcel Broodthaers. Shanks notes the British counterpart to this phenomenon, but only in the 1990s and in relation to performance exclusively. Shanks, "Hybrid Art and Science."

[286] Incidentally, Smithson's most heavily underlined passages of his personal copy of Foucault's book, are the introduction and the chapter on classification. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[287] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1970], xv.

In the site tents at Bankside, Dion and the field centre managers supervised the cleaning, conservation, and classification of findings into broad categories such as ceramic, glass, bone, plastic, metal, leather, and so on. The items were arranged on tables inside and outside of the tents and later placed in labeled boxes or plastic bags (Fig. 22). Judging from photographs of the installation, it did not look very different from an archaeology lab, but the exposure to the public made it less of a strictly intellectual enterprise. The way of aligning the fragmented materials, faced up, following a pattern—of shape, color, etc.—recalls the aesthetic of minimalist works where repetition takes center stage (Sol Lewitt). The same can be said about *History Trash Scan*, 1996, and the laboratory section of *Laboratory/Collection*, in *Raiding Neptune's Vault*, 1997/98 (Figs. 23 and Fig. 24).[288] Unlike archaeological types, Dion's became ends in themselves, worthy to be appreciated for their visual appearance. Although archaeological types are often constructed in relation to shapes, pure celebration of form is something that rarely occurs in a scientific context. Because Dion's projects are not problem-oriented, he is not interested in the specific dates or provenance of each piece to figure out a cultural issue related to those pieces. Archaeologically, his types lack the secure contexts that ensure relational information between them; they only have value as relative comparative material.[289] By the same token, the timetable of events, maps and photographs on display in Tent A were exhibited for their visual appeal as much as their documentary value.

[288] The very choice of one of the Venice pieces for the cover of Hodder's edited book *Archaeological Theory Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, attests to the visual pleasure.

[289] To avoid interference with systematic archaeological research, Dion works on sites with disturbed deposits that are usually meaningless to archaeologists in terms of the contextual information they can provide. In the Thames, Dion worked closely with Colin Renfrew in case he and the team found objects with archaeological significance (regardless of the lack of secured context). In addition, the artist was not allowed to "dig" more that six inches below the surface in order to preserve the ecological stability of the river.

Although lacking the performative aspect of Dion's project, Susan Hiller's *Fragments*, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in 1978, is a key antecedent to the analytical dealings at the Field Center. Hiller did not attempt to recreate a lab environment. She blatantly set up her installation in an art gallery, but the quality of the material on view remained faithful to what one would find in an archaeological lab (in this sense it is closer to the Fribourg and Venice projects where the juxtaposition between art and science is sharper). Hiller placed 210 small broken pieces of Pueblo pottery on 100 sheets of sketchbook paper laid on the floor in a grid formation, as well as on the walls inside transparent bags (Fig. 25). Each floor sheet also contained a gouache painting of a pottery fragment, different from the actual one resting on the paper. In addition, monochrome charts and tabulations, as well as photographs and various forms of written statement covered the walls. Hiller's fragments—as they appeared in her installation—resulted in a disturbing display because they are just fragments of pottery. They break the myth of the exotic entire pot that is pleasant to look at in a museum space. According to Guy Brett "it was not simply that the work was composed of fragments—both material and verbal—but that they remained fragments, refusing to conjure up defined wholes, either artistic or scientific."[290] As Dion does, Hiller cuts the chain of expected behavior in a stage that is unexpected to the viewer. Potsherds are rarely shown on display—be it artistic or scientific.

Hiller attempted to articulate what is inarticulate by juxtaposing the shards with conventional art materials (canvas, paint).[291] Numbers, binomial color designations, paintings, word combinations, and charts made a new kind of equation that suggested that abstract notations such as "objective" properties, "subjective" evaluative terms, and materials

[290] Guy Brett, "The materials of the artists," in *Susan Hiller*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1996, 20.
[291] Susan Hiller, "Art and Anthropology/Anthropology and Art," *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996, 27.

are equivalent and interchangeable. Furthermore, the descriptive and analytic language used by Hiller led the audience to ponder its effectiveness to measure Pueblo reality. Hiller was not talking about the producers of the fragments as much as she was talking about our own society's difficulty in looking at a sherd of pottery as a fragmented view of a particular reality. Hiller's work reminds us that "a fragmented view of the world is all we've got."[292]

Dion's Thames Tents proved more powerful than Hiller's because they were about the actual dealings of Dion, his field assistants, volunteers, and the public with the pieces. Field workers discussed, compared, and speculated about the meaning, function, and life history of the objects, while observant visitors also engaged in such discussions. Dion himself was *in situ* cleaning, sorting out and determining what was worthy to be seen at Tent A. Although Tent A was nicknamed "Interpretation Center," Dion showed that interpretation happened everywhere, beyond the confines of that specific space. In this tent all the drawings and charts on Hiller's display could be found. Even today, in the permanent collection of the Tate Modern, maps and diagrams are attached to the cabinets of curiosities that store all the processed and unprocessed materials. Again, Dion gave the audience the chance to see practices usually seen as mere means to an end as meaningful in their own right.

As much as the use of humor in Dion's archaeological work is successfully thought provoking, the cost of attempting an alternative way of self-reflexivity within archaeology is rather high, and that may be its failure. Let us remember the harsh criticism that followed the publication of Shanks and Tilley's *Re-Constructing Archaeology* as well as the lack of popularity of the "literary style" in the current training of archaeologists. It is one thing to see Dion "play" with archaeology because he is a dilettante, but a completely different one to

[292] Hiller, "Art and Anthropology," 28.

see professional archaeologists altering the traditional guidelines of the discipline. Using humor in archaeology from within is thought to automatically diminish the validity of the content of what is written or done. It forces the discipline to remain highly specific and bounded, instead of reaching out to alternative strategies and wider audiences.

Facing this less than encouraging reception of alternative strategies in archaeological practice, some scholars may feel compelled to quit the field altogether in favor of the arts or the humanities. That was the case of Susan Hiller in the mid 1970s. The American artist who has resided in England ever since, was previously an anthropology doctoral candidate at Tulane University. She remembers that after being entirely committed and "indoctrinated" into an "often traumatic" intellectual quest, especially the dynamics of the participant observer method, the joy of hand/eye activity was almost overwhelming.[293] Hiller refers to the drawings that she made in the margins of a book while attending a lecture. From then on, the artist determined to find a way of being "inside all her activities" since she could not do this within anthropology and nor did she have the ability to modify the field.[294]

To Hiller, being a social scientist not only implied a difficulty with representation at large, but with *visual* representation. As Hiller puts it: "I am not convinced that anthropologists have much interest in the art of their own culture, and I think some of them would probably be at a loss to describe developments subsequent to say, Cubism."[295] This is true even for committed self-reflexive archaeologists who have difficulty overturning the ways in which they have been disciplined to use their eyes. Hiller's analysis is close to Dion's remark upon the divide between academics and artists when approaching theory

[293] Hiller, Ibid., 19. Hiller went through this experience at the time anthropology was developing symbolic paradigms to study culture, which although revolutionary, were yet far from the discipline's full self-critique of the early 1980s.
[294] Hiller, Ibid.
[295] Hiller, "Art and Anthropology," 20.

discussed earlier. Dion, in fact, recognizes the influence of Hiller in his work.[296] Interestingly, Dion approached archaeology through an expatriate, someone who voluntarily procured a distance between her and anthropological practice. I do not mean to suggest that archaeologists should quit their field and become artists to ensure an effective (and three-dimensional) self-critique in their practice. Rather, I want to stress how openness to the work of artists might facilitate archaeologists' efforts to create distance with their practice, employ humor, and build connections not previously foreseen.

Despite Dion's status as artist and his respectful attitude toward archaeologists, his work still causes disarray or indifference to some. Dion's imitation of archaeologists' lives may bring up a certain feeling of self-consciousness in the viewers. This reaction is understandable, especially when the inside-out strategy is turned onto Dion himself. Although Dion opened up his own artistic process when performing at the Field Centre, he deliberately intended to expose such a part of the process from the very beginning. There are several other stages that he chose not to make public. For example, in 2003 Dion's journals and scrapbooks, where he plans many of his projects, were exhibited at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art along with some of his works (Fig. 26). Dion confessed:

> I did not plan on ever showing them. I am very shy about many aspects of them; they are personal in many ways. I'm a horrendous speller, for instance. There are a lot of pieces articulated in the notebooks that do not get made and there are good reasons for why they do not get made—they're not very interesting or successful.[297]

The mix of fear and embarrassment described by Dion relates to the feeling of distress of archaeologists who may dislike, or feel threatened and/or insulted by his work. Moreover, it relates to the feeling of any archaeologist about revealing mistakes that may occur while

[296] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.
[297] Bree Edwards, "Interview with Mark Dion," *Mark Dion: Drawings, Journals, Photographs, Souvenirs, and Trophies 1990-2003*, ed. Richard Klein, Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, 11.

constructing types in the lab or while defining natural layers in controlled stratigraphic excavations. Although they prove to be meaningful, flaws tend to be precious only to foreign eyes. Likewise, the boundaries of what constitutes a flaw or something meaningful are very different depending whether one is inside, outside, or in the margins of a particular field. In the same way in which it took an artist to expose the archaeological process, it also took an outsider to exhibit Dion's diaries. Public humiliation has never been a good idea from the object's perspective.

A similar feeling of nakedness may have also reached the audience of the Tate dig. Dion's findings at the Thames spanned from fossils to present day credit cards and plastic aliens (Fig. 27). Because the artist deemed all objects equally important and grouped them in types according to his idiosyncrasy, many times the old and the modern ended up together (e.g., types grouped by material or color, and so on and so forth). While chronological distance with the past tends to allow objects to live in uncontested categories, the opposite occurs with objects from present everyday life. People may experience a sense of nakedness comparable to the one archaeologists experience when seeing the "behind the scenes" of the discipline revealed and manipulated. Seeing objects of which we know the real use, increases the chances of challenging the "types" in which they have been framed. They make no sense except as methodological tools.

One of the most effective anachronistic classifications of the Tate dig is one that succeeded the field stage. At the time of the show it was exhibited at Art Now at the Tate Millbank, and is currently on display at the permanent collection of the Tate Modern, along with the cabinets and a locker with Dion's archaeological gear. It consists of a set of black and white studio portraits of the Tate's dig team taken by photographer Andrew Dunkley

(Fig. 28). The photographs are displayed in a grid pattern and each one includes a label with the name of the person in question and his or her role within the Tate project, ranging from field assistants to the curator, and Dion himself. People appear wearing clothes or holding objects that confirm the roles stated in the labels. The assemblage resembles the way in which cultural and natural fragments were arranged in Dion's Field Center tents, or the way in which types are displayed in the drawers of the cabinets next to them. Seeing human beings classified in such an unexpected context is funny, but it quickly takes us back to the nineteenth century. Dion's Dig team is not very different from the classifications of non-Western "primitive" people. They also were portrayed in full regalia in studio photographs, but to illustrate their inferiority in relation to Europeans. While today we all know that the crew in question is not different from anybody in terms of brain size, the nineteenth century classifications may not seem as easy to tell apart. Dion's portraits work as a red flag prompting that reflexion.

Anachronisms may take a completely different direction as well. As Dion recalls:

> young people congratulated me because they thought I sold the Tate garbage, and it's all about perception, they think I tricked them into buying and displaying absolutely useless garbage and that is absolutely not a dimension of it because there is so much work… tricking should be a lot easier than that and these pieces are enormously time consuming.[298]

As a matter of fact, Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* involved careful planning and considerable coordination efforts before, during, and after the visible field stage. Despite, or perhaps in spite of, being an amateur dilettante, Dion proved that critical thinking and working systematically are, and should be, not mutually exclusive qualities of his work and the archaeological process. At the same time that he stressed the arbitrariness of analytic strategies, he stressed the equally serious and laborious aspects that are inherent to them.

[298] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

Moreover, he also proved that both critical thinking and systematic work can take a humorous spin without sacrificing credibility.

From England to New England: Proud of Being American

During the spring of 2001 Mark Dion was again to be seen in full archaeological gear, this time at home, in the United States of America. The concept behind this project was basically the same as that of the Tate Modern. Dion "dug" at three different locations in New England to sort out the findings later and display them in cabinets in local museums—Fuller Museum of Art, David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University, and University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Once more, Dion worked with a team of volunteer field workers, fellow artists, curators, and archaeologists. In the first dig, Providence, the crew beach-combed the shores of the Seekonk River, around India point, and Narragansett Bay, near former industrial ports. In the second dig, New Bedford, the crew literally dug an almost seven foot deep hole on the original location of O'Malley's Tavern. Finally, in the third dig at Brockton, the crew raked down mounds of dirt located next to the Melrose Cemetery and behind the Brockton Historical Society.

The analytical stage of Dion's project, the one that occurs in the laboratory, emulated the one in London except for taking place inside actual buildings instead of tents (Fig. 29). Again, he was able to disclose the hidden, expose the arbitrariness in making artificial types, mix and match past and present, and convey the labor-intense nature of both his artistic and "real" archaeological practice. A major difference between the British and American digs, however, was the depth of their historical site-specificities. While the Thames released objects as far back as 50 million years old (fossilized sea-urchin), in New England the digs

exposed pieces that were largely contemporary, dating to the eighteenth-century at the very earliest.[299] In this section, I discuss the ramifications of Dion's *New England Digs* in the construction and reproduction of American historical identity.

Going Native

The prospect of digging into America's past, and specifically New England's past, meant something special to Dion. He was born and raised in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, a few miles away from New Bedford, the location of his second dig. As an artist who works extensively abroad, the proposal of curator Denise Markonish—also a New England native—seemed difficult for Dion to decline: "for me, it is rare to work on a site-sensitive project where my background relationship to the place is so rich."[300] The project was indeed so personal to Dion that his parents and family members collaborated in different stages of the process. Furthermore, Dion's rich relationship to New England also surfaced in the ways in which he aligned himself within former artistic traditions. As noted by Gregory Volk, Dion's classifications of objects not only make references to still lifes, but also bare connections to nineteenth-century luminist paintings.[301] They both represent coastal landscapes of New England, but while Dion's predecessors depicted the actual scenery, he modeled the cultural objects excavated from the sites in question. In addition, Volk recognizes how Dion followed the utopian tradition through "understanding that an artwork really can cross over into daily life as a multifaceted encounter."[302]

[299] For the history of each site see *Mark Dion New England Digs*.
[300] Markonish "Interview," 47.
[301] Gregory Volk, "Mark Dion in New England and Vice Versa," *Mark Dion New England Digs*, 15.
[302] Ibid.

Going native in his native land enabled Dion to exploit the practical nuances of New England daily life, such as the sheer difference between being the target and being the promoter of artistic practice. According to the artist, Brockton, New Bedford and Providence have never been major or sophisticated cultural centers like Boston, they "are hard-boiled New England working-class cities which can manifest suspicion if not outright enmity for visual art."[303] Dion's artwork seemed especially suspicious for this type of audience since it is unconventional even within the confines of visual art. In addition to the performative aspect of his digs, the artist refers to his artifacts as "even less impressive than the merely mundane. They are fragments, broken bits of the mundane. What is less impressive than a ketchup bottle? Half a ketchup bottle."[304] And he is right; to many people, not just from working-class New England cities, Andy Warhol's silkscreens of Campbell soup cans are still anything but impressive, or anything but art.[305] But aware of what could legitimately be read as a shortcoming, Dion and Markonish also knew that people's resistance to contemporary art could help strengthen the ties to their own history.

As Dion notes "for many people the moment they feel their lives historicized for the first time is a powerful one ... the realization of the passage of time is somehow made concrete through objects, which outlive us."[306] That was the case in *New England Digs* since the retrieved artifacts belong almost entirely to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowing people to identify themselves with a great part of the findings. Moreover, because Dion approaches his classifications paying no attention to chronology, those findings

[303] Markonish "Interview," 47.
[304] Markonish "Interview," 41.
[305] Conversely, when seen from the perspective of an archaeology museum, fragments of objects are rarely on display in favor of complete and "more impressive" artifacts. Archaeology is largely about the everyday lives of past societies, especially after the 1960s, but that has little to do with curatorial decisions on what is chosen to be on display in museums.
[306] Markonish "Interview," 28.

coexisted with each other constructing "a continuum of history, which emphasizes that today's actions have lingering consequences. Nothing that is thrown away ever goes away."[307] Thus, the rich background relationship between Dion and the place of the *Digs* was extended to the native audience. Dion and Markonish successfully managed to transform a worst-case scenario for contemporary art, into a perfect setting for celebrating American history *through* art.

The emotional attachment of Dion and his fellow New England natives, as well as the artistic traditions evoked by his work, both relate to a shallow and homogenous American history, only a couple centuries old. And although there is no question that New England is a lot newer than England, the territory was populated long before the seventeenth-century European settlement. The pre-Anglo American past, however, was absent from Dion's democratic pastiche of types. There were no ties or sense of continuity with the distant prehistoric past. The world as it entered Dion's work was indeed the result of specific criteria for selecting those sites. According to Markonish, they had to be sites that proved unique to Brockton, New Bedford and Providence in terms of historical or cultural significance, but that also proved "insignificant and disturbed." The latter criterion is a variation on the precautions that Dion took in London as a way of demonstrating his commitment and respect for archaeology, despite his dilettantism. Specifically, it means refraining from intervening in undisturbed sites, mostly Native American, that are meaningful because of the contextual (stratigraphic) information they can provide under systematic archaeological research.

Cultural resources managers deemed all three deposits of *New England Digs* disturbed and thus insignificant, leaving Dion free to use them. The deposits consisted of

[307] Markonish "Interview," 28.

usually already moved dirt (used as fills) exposing contemporary, eighteenth, and nineteenth century debris, altogether. As Dion explains, Native American remains were not visible in the fills:

> but even then, the Native American Cultural Resources managers came in and wanted to be sure of what we were doing, that there was absolutely no chance of finding any Native American artifacts because we were working mostly with fill and are not going beyond the original foundations…but if we had, there would have been trouble…they were still making sure that we were not cheating, doing more than what we claimed.[308]

Although avoiding Native American sites is a good thing in the name of future scientific and systematic research, it also helped further the historical exclusion of Native Americans in the region. In Dion's words, the relationship between New England natives and their Native American past:

> is very, very mythic … all the names you grow up with are Native American in some way, but I think because the age of contact was so long ago there's certainly not much of a presence in the relationship of people and that Native American tradition, at least where I grew up, even though you still find things of course.[309]

The British set foot on Plymouth in 1610, almost four centuries ago, purchasing territory from Chief Massasoit. The peace did not last long as Indian wars followed within a few decades when the natives began to see their land taken away.[310] A lack of understanding, let alone integration, between the two ethnic groups—the Massachuset (which means "a large hill place" in Algonquian language) and the British pilgrims, led to a complete erasure of Native Americans in the region. Although one should not expect dumpsters to be culturally diverse, the nature of the disturbed fillings acted as a metaphor for that mythic

[308] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.
[309] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.
[310] For further details, see Antone G. Souza Jr., "A Short Early History of New Bedford, " *Mark Dion New England Digs*, 28.

relationship. Native Americans play no prominent role in the construction and reproduction of New England's American identity, except for specific occasions (e.g. Thanksgiving). For better or for worse, the Native American past was deliberately erased from Dion's project.

From this perspective, while playing local Dion was still a bit of an intruder in a territory occupied long before European settlement. This is certainly not Dion's fault; it is just the result of the historical relationship between the inhabitants of New England and their Native American prehistoric past. So when Dion wonders "Are these things [the artifacts the dig teams found] repressed histories returning, familiar things coming back to haunt or delight us? One clue is that their return is predicated on their exclusion," he could not be more right.[311] The exclusion of the Native American aspect of everyday life in New England returns to haunt us through Dion's work, but once again, predicated on its very exclusion. Dion knows that had he found Native American remains the project would have taken "a whole different dimension."[312] Indeed, in such a scenario it is difficult to find a "right" way to proceed when nothing seems to have been done rightly. Perhaps because Dion is removed from the cultural politics of anthropology and archaeology, his approach to the matter is still quite sensible. In his view, "the best thing would have been to find things and treat them with the same neutrality, so if I had found them that's what I would have done."[313]

Dion presents himself as the kind of museum curator who would not hesitate to display Native American objects along with Anglo American objects in a place like the Fuller Art Museum, MOMA or the National Gallery of Art, but not because they bear formal "affinities" or because he is wittingly "selling garbage" to them, but because they are equally

[311] Markonish "Interview," 41.
[312] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.
[313] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

meaningful, regardless of their appearance. Interestingly, that "classless" sensitivity stems from Dion's formative years in Massachusetts:

> At the [New Bedford] Whaling Museum, as it evolved, older exhibits existed side by side with new ones. While that probably reflected a fiscal necessity rather than a curatorial decision, it worked in an enlightening way. That hybrid museum full of art, practical objects, wonders of the everyday, trophies and souvenirs—which were not overly didactic or condescending but rather mysterious and generative— remains for me a standard measure which few institutions live up to.[314]

Dion's perspective is especially progressive given the recent opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C.'s national Mall. A Washington Post staff writer described the day of public celebrations as "a family reunion" with "a meandering, pleasing friendliness, almost like the last 500 years or so had just been some odd misunderstanding. The news, at least on the Mall, is that we're all mostly good now."[315] Perhaps one day Dion will help break the news that there is no need to cross the Mall to experience Native and Non-Native American everyday life, they will be side by side.

Nothing That Is Thrown Away Ever Goes Away

As much as the dig projects disclose archaeology's *modus operandi* through Dion's own creative process, one might consider where the artist locates the limits of his artistic production. To Dion "the process [of the digs] ends when the cabinets are locked … when they are finally done."[316] Although the creative production may end there, the cultural life of the installations continues with the displacement of their physical location and/or of their meaning. The changing circumstances (contexts) generate different types of social relations between and around them—a process similar to the way in which Dion saw the *New England*

[314] Markonish "Interview," 47.
[315] Hank Stuever, "A Family Reunion," *The Washington Post*, C1, C8, September 22, 2004.
[316] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

Digs, as concentric circles of meaning.[317] The closer circle was more aware of the specifics, but he did not expect everyone to be in that circle. In this case, concentric circles radiate from the finished piece outwards. He may be closer to the innermost, but there is no control over the number of contexts that it can affect after the cabinets are locked. Using Dion's own words: "nothing that is thrown away ever goes away."

Generally, Dion does not participate in the aftermath of his archaeological projects. In the case of the digs that took place in Europe, the cabinets and related material have remained in their original locations since their meaning is tied to their site specificity. [318] This is not the case for *New England Digs* as well as the others that have taken place in the United States.[319] After exhibition at their three original venues and at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Dion stored the entire New England project at his house in Beach Lake, Pennsylvania. Although he plans to show it again he is aware that "the deeper it comes into storage the more difficult it is to come out."[320] In the summer of 2004, upon my request Dion opened his storage facility, a space that is not normally open to public view or scrutiny. When the artist disclosed the intimacy of his steel barn, I felt like meeting Charles Wilson Peale in his museum (Fig. 30). Not only the entrance to the barn is closed with a curtain that Dion held for me, but inside the artist has developed a new classification system to store the project adding another layer to the creative production of *New England Digs* (Fig. 31).

Ironically enough, the interior of Dion's metal barn looks very much like an archaeology laboratory. The three unlocked empty cabinets lie next to each other behind plastic curtains while boxes originally inside the cabinets are placed on shelves, hand in hand

[317] Markonish "Interview," 36.
[318] The Tate Dig remained in London and so did the digs at Fribourg and Venice.
[319] Aside from *New England Digs*, Dion did a less known dig project in Queens, NY, and the more high profile Moma dig in Manhattan, NY.
[320] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

with objects from "nature" projects, as well as with costumes from projects of Dion's partner, artist J. Morgan Puet (Fig. 32). The piling up of boxes and the shelves themselves also recall the tents at the Tate as well as Dion's earlier work "Department of Anthropology" from *Angelica Point*, 1994 (Fig. 33). When I mentioned this visual connection to Dion, he almost apologetically said that his barn is a lot more chaotic than archaeology labs (and his dig labs)—which is not always the case. Again I was overturning the strategy of scrutinizing the hidden onto himself, as in the exhibit of his journals and scrapbooks.

At the time of our meeting, Dion was working on a dig project for Moma's reopening in November of 2004. As the artist explained, the laboratory to be mounted on site was recycled from one that he had set up in a New York Field Station in the summer of 2004. A limited budget for the Moma show forced Dion to use half of the original lab (Fig. 34), which happens to be the most lab-like that he had ever used in a dig project. It was actually inspired by Staten Island's Water Street on-site archaeology lab that Dion had visited. This operation of mixing and matching pieces of different installations as well as the chaotic classifications inside the steel barn are also part of Dion's analytical process of determining what goes where. In fact, they are not that different from Dion's *modus operandi* when producing his scrapbooks:

> Before I take my magazines out for recycling I go through them and cut out all the images I am interested in. I put these clippings in a general envelope and then more or less curate that envelope into these pages. Sometimes I might save up material for six months before I get the chance to put it together. There is a crazy taxonomy to it. The scrapbooks also chart developments in my personal perspective and field of discourse. Their composition relies on what I'm obsessing about at a particular moment.[321]

Although his scrapbooks revealed unfinished works, projects of finalized work, and blueprints of work that never happened, the steel storage facility revealed the aftermath of

[321] Edwards, "Interview with Mark Dion," 11.

works already proved successful. Aside from archaeological analysis, Dion's creative process is just one example of the countless instances in which classifications and types are constructed because and for different motives. Only some are more apparent to the makers than others.

Significant and Disturbing

Mark Dion nicknamed the New England Digs project "insignificant and disturbed" to recall the kind of contexts in which he and his crew were and normally are allowed to intervene. Yet, Dion's archaeological projects have proved that what may appear insignificant to archaeology due to disturbance of context, can still be significant let alone disturbing. I am not referring to archaeology's disregard for disturbed contexts altogether. There are several examples of archaeological studies of refuse that are immensely significant such as William Rathje's Garbage Project and the archaeology of middens.[322] What is more disturbing for archaeology is Dion's ability to invert what is normally considered private and public inside the discipline.

Dion's credentials as visual artist and outsider to archaeology allow him to materialize his view of archaeological practice in three-dimensional form using humor. His dig projects in London and New England, suggest a direct relationship between the historical depth of each place and the ways in which British and Americans approach art, archaeology, and humor. The artist describes the reaction of the audience to each of his works:

> If you go to the Tate Modern it's absolutely full of people. And a lot of that work I don't know how you would approach it if you don't come from a somewhat formal art history background. So I find it extremely interesting

[322] See William H. Rathje and C. Murphy, *The Archaeology of Garbage*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1992; on archaeology of middens see, for example, Gregory Waselkov, "Shellfish Gathering and Shell Midden Archaeology," *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 10, 1987, 112-167.

> that it's so popular or that people are willing to take the challenge to look at it, but also that they are extremely irreverent about it, they are not embarrassed to think it's not art, … they are taunting the work and the work is taunting them back … Here [United States] I think there's still this kind of reverence, people go to art museums very much as this special place, something in between a church and a library, so it's harder to get them interact with things … I think also, maybe even in popular culture there's more presence of archaeology in Britain, you know all these shows like *The Time Team*, British Television programs, archaeological teams who go to a site to uncover a mystery, very much the kind of detective story narrative of discovering through carbon dating and this whole series of comparative frames of what an object is or what a site was used for … so I think there's greater amateur appreciation of archaeology there.[323]

Dion's words resonate with those of Smithson back in the 1960s, when he asserted how "the varieties of humor are pretty foreign to the American temperament. It seems that the American temperament doesn't associate art with humor. Humor is not considered serious."[324] Forty years later, Dion's *New England Digs* demonstrated that at least in hard-boiled New England working-class cities art is still not associated with humor. One wonders if there is any relation with Mark Leone's point regarding the ways in which British and American archaeologists have approached their discipline.

Let us remember that Leone thinks that Britain's seamless relationship with the past might be a reason to explain the British origins of postprocessualism. What Dion describes as an irreverent attitude of the British public at the Tate is not very different from British postprocessualists such as Shanks and Tilley, or those trained in Britain such as Meskell and Holtorf. They too are taunting the practice of archaeology as they feel free to interact with the discipline as a cultural construct, perhaps because the past has been taunting them for longer. They are less afraid to reinvent the practice. As Dion remarks:

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[323] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.
[324] Robert Smithson, "What is a Museum?" [1967], a Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 50.

> The British school of archaeology really does have a strong critical theory, cultural studies component to it and they are certainly questioning about their own process whereas here [in the US] it's much more pragmatic and far less of that, and I think that's true in the rest of the [European] continent as well… If you come out with that critical theory way they don't know how to respond…. I think in Britain very often you find people who can do the kind of procedural archaeology but also see that the archaeology itself is produced in culture, there is a sense of distance that they can take from their own practice whereas here I don't think that's near. I haven't encountered that kind of archaeology.
>
> In Britain because there is a lot funding and the way things are managed, in these archaeological sites they have artists in residence …. We [Americans] are so far from imagining that as a possibility here, there's nothing like that, no one will ever think of it. [325]

If Americans did not associate humor with art in the 1960s, neither did they associate it with science. Processual archaeology, one of the most positivistic and humorless archaeological paradigms, did actually originate in the United States in the 1960s. Forty years later, many American archaeologists are critical of the overpowering role of positivism, even in hard-boiled New England working class cities. However, dealing with the Native American heritage is still a major source of contention both inside and outside the discipline. The Native American past is recently taunting Americans and American history on a steady basis and will not take exclusion for an answer. To some degree this issue may prevent archaeologists from reinventing themselves more freely. Dion's dilettante perception of American archaeology is not entirely inaccurate; the exercise of looking at the practice critically is not as generalized as it is in Britain.

Dion's remarks plus my own positive bias towards British archaeology add to the temptation to classify the Brits as the good and Americans as the bad (something that I may have already done long ago). Far from consciously attempting to do so, this biased analysis

[325] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

should be seen as a heuristic exercise pointing to a constant question throughout this chapter: the slippage between art and science, and most importantly, the slippage between any type of categories. Does it matter whether one is an artist or archaeologist? Whether one is intellectual or pragmatic? Isn't it another obsessive way of classifying people? Can't we all be hybrids? Will certain disciplinary boundaries ever be crossed? Should they be crossed? Perhaps new categories need to be created. Dion's archaeological projects demonstrate that self-critique helps raise awareness about the specific ways in which different fields discipline our eyes and ultimately condition our representations of social reality. Dion's projects also demonstrate that creating distance from one's practice and crossing over to other practices is crucial to achieve self-criticism.

Archaeologist Leah Rosenmeier has expressed that she would be interested to see Dion "move from observing and critiquing archaeological categorization into archaeological interpretations and conclusions about past human life."[326] Dion actually agrees with her:

> I think this [MOMA] will be my last archaeological project certainly for a while. Also largely because I feel like I just have said what I had to say with these projects, the only reason why I'm doing this last one is because the venue is just so high profile that really, after this I will have nothing else to say. I did the Venice Biennale, which is very high profile, the Tate and now this. I don't really have a reason for doing this ever again… not that I think all the questions were answered, but just that I think I couldn't do it in this way… I think I have to get closer to archaeology in order to continue.[327]

So perhaps, in the future, while Dion enters yet another category, he will begin reading through field reports and more polished interpretations about the past, and he may respond to Rosenmeier's interest or he may not…after all, he is a visual artist not an archaeologist.

[326] Rosenmeier, "Categories of Cognition," 19.
[327] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Beach Lake, PA.

Chapter 4. Interpretation and Display: Fred Wilson

> … I think everyone's work has a lot to do with what they are, and in many ways the work that I do is describing my experiences over and over again.
> Fred Wilson[328]

Introduction

From April 1992 to February 1993, attendance at Baltimore's Maryland Historical Society reached record numbers. More than fifty thousand people visited the installation *Mining the Museum* by Fred Wilson. For the first time in the history of the institution, a contemporary artist had free range to work with the Society's collection. Although Wilson did not add many new elements to what already existed, he managed to tell a story completely different from what the Society had been officially telling for years. Instead of providing answers and statements about Maryland's past, Wilson questioned the ways in which histories of race and inequality are constructed in the present.

Wilson's interest in the contemporary dynamics of creating a story about the past resonates with the nature of archaeological practice as a discipline of mediation. As discussed in the preceding chapters, whenever there is decision making on the part of the archaeologist there is also interpretation, regardless of the stage of the investigation. Many introductory textbooks to archaeology, however, still describe archaeological research as a linear process placing interpretation at the end of the experience. Brian M. Fagan for example argues that:

> Interpreting the *resulting* classified and thoroughly analyzed data involves not only synthesizing all the information from the investigation but also final

[328] Leslie King-Hammond, "A Conversation with Fred Wilson," *Mining the Museum, An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Lisa G. Corrin, Baltimore: The Contemporary in association with The New Press, 1994, 25.

> examination of the basic questions formulated at the beginning of the project. These tests produce models for reconstructing and explaining the prehistory of the site or region…[329]

This assumption considers interpretation as if it were detached from data without questioning the ways in which information is selected, retrieved, analyzed or even how a topic is initially selected for investigation. Furthermore, when professionals go on to present any part of the data to a non-specialist audience in a museum setting, they often choose to merely illustrate these "explanatory models." Thus, the museum not only perpetuates closed off interpretations of the past, but in the process of doing so, it also replicates the interpretive acts inherent in archaeological research. In addition to selecting, classifying and creating a particular narrative for the pieces on display, archaeologists/curators fail to acknowledge the decisions that come along with putting an exhibition together. Consequently, both archaeological and museological practices appear as neutral, as if they were immune to any values or ideology.

Since the 1960s, both visual artists and scholars from the humanities and social sciences have extensively critiqued the museum as one of the institutions in which the ideological power of interpretation is most evident. Wilson's installation at the Maryland Historical Society builds on a long history of artwork addressing the topic, including the one of Smithson at its earliest stages, and of Dion, most recently. While *Mining the Museum* did not unveil unknown issues to many of these artists or archaeologists, it did make them personal, specific, and real. Wilson worked from *inside* the institution that he was critiquing and subtly materialized the objects of his critique. Moreover, unlike Smithson and Dion, who produced new work to comment on the construction and representation of (pre)history,

[329] Brian M. Fagan, *In the Beginning: An Introduction to Archaeology*, Upper Saddler River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001, 96-7.

the novelty and success of Wilson's resided in its economical aspect. Wilson's installations rely on existing collections including very little material production of his own. The extent of his critique however is anything but sober.

In this chapter I discuss the work of Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society as well as at the Seattle Art Museum, to help disclose the arbitrary aspects of exhibition display and "theory building" that are also present in archaeological practice as a whole. Although none of the installations took place in a museum self-identified as devoted to archaeology *per se*, I am interested in Wilson's rationale to unmask the *modus operandi* of these institutions. Both museums differ in their nature and range of material, yet they operate under similar dynamics. I contend that the power relations inherent in these dynamics are as characteristic of archaeology as the fact that it is a discipline that deals with objects from the archaeological past.

Although Wilson's work at Maryland undoubtedly opened new territory, the novelty of the project also raised important questions. In 1994 Lisa Corrin, curator of the show, wrote:

> Will the project now spawn a series of exhibitions that lack the ethical or epistemological imperative of the original? Often the admission of a dysfunctional past is used to disarm adversarial criticism. If reform is only skin-deep, it can easily be co-opted by a recalcitrant establishment. If this should happen, what does it imply for real ideological change?[330]

Twelve years later it seems worthwhile to evaluate those questions as well as the role and place of archaeological practice within the institutional landscape and ideological change. Furthermore, looking back helps to evaluate the prospects of a more fertile relationship between the practice and discipline of archaeology and the visual arts.

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[330] Lisa G. Corrin, "Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves," *Mining the Museum, An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Corrin, 18.

The Genealogies of Fred Wilson

Only seven years apart, Fred Wilson (b. 1954) and Mark Dion (b. 1961) are both American artists who received formal training in a university setting; they too were born, raised and still live on the East Coast. Although they stand in a similar critical stance towards the American social fabric and choose to express themselves through three-dimensional work, the routes that brought them to that place are quite different. Wilson is less ready than Dion to assert the common roots of their artistic heritage. In 2001, Wilson declared that only "in the intervening years since I've engaged the art world, I've become much more aware of my own art historical lineage."[331]

Wilson identifies Marcel Duchamp as an influential figure to his work who "gave me the ability to do what I do, and for it to be understood as art," as well as a general formal appeal of the minimalists, and, to a lesser extent, the conceptualists.[332] Among the latter he recognizes the influence of Smithson:

> I studied art in the 70s…. while he wasn't one of the people that I focused on—not that I focus in any particular person—there are a lot of crossovers in what I do and what he thought about and did …. I think about space a lot, I think about land, reclamation… He is a person of his time and we have very different backgrounds, but I think he was influential on me in ways that I can't say how directly …. he is a major player in my education process.[333]

The seven-year difference between Wilson and Dion may play a role in their more or less conscious relation to the history of art. Only by the late 1970s, concurrently to Wilson's years of formal art training, art historians and critics began to theoretically assess the value of Smithson and his peers' work in relation to the art practice of the last two decades. While

[331] Maurice Berger and Fred Wilson, "Collaboration, Museums, and the Politics of Display: A Conversation with Fred Wilson (25 January 2001)," *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, Maurice Berger with contributions by Fred Wilson and Jennifer González, Issues in Cultural Theory 4, Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001, 38.
[332] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 38.
[333] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

Dion clearly places Smithson in his "pantheon" due to his ability to expand the field of art practice, Wilson values the outcome of Smithson's effort but does not pay as much attention to the sense of uprooting that led him to do so. The difficulty to register the ensuing pain in Smithson's practice may stem from Wilson's completely different relation to issues of strangeness. Wilson himself felt out of context long before, and regardless of, his artistic interests: "being a person of color in the United States and an outsider in other countries has influenced me totally. Being bounced between various contexts has made perceptual shifts commonplace for me."[334]

Originally from the Bronx, Wilson recalls being the only African-American child in the entire school and town of Westchester, New York, where he grew up. Later, while pursuing his BFA at SUNY Purchase, he continued to be the only African-American student in the art school. An important mentor during his training was Antonio Frasconi, a printmaker from Uruguay since "he was from the Third World—which I relate to….we had a certain understanding about otherness."[335] Similarly, Wilson recounts that Isamu Noguchi's awareness of his bicultural background along with his interest in space and dance, spoke directly to him as a young artist. "I suppose I was searching for nonwhite artists to be inspired by."[336] During his last year of college Wilson also traveled to Egypt and West Africa, an experience that he considers a turning point in his life since "it expanded my whole view of the world: There are other realities."[337] Moreover, those realities allowed him to reconcile the multiple racial and cultural backgrounds in his extended family—Wilson's

[334] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 36.
[335] King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 27.
[336] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 38.
[337] King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 29.

mother is Caribbean: "I didn't have to feel bad for being an outsider, because I was supposed to be."[338]

After graduating from Purchase in 1976, Wilson worked in different museums and galleries in New York City as a way of supporting himself. He played roles as different as freelance educator, museum guard, administrator, preparator, and curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the American Craft Museum, among other venues. These experiences heightened Wilson's critical approach to personal situations of exclusion and otherness:

> At the American Museum of Natural History, those of us who were interpreters in the galleries were seen as the native informants by the visitors. While being chosen by the museum in part for our ethnicity made sense, the forceful context of the ethnographic display dissolved the distance for the visitor between us as New Yorkers and us as moving mannequins.[339]

Working behind the scenes enabled Wilson to crystallyze a network of relationships in only one place—the museum—that acted as substitute for other arenas in which the same structure of power is at work. In the artist's words "the museum is like American society at large … you're in this environment you're supposed to understand and you're supposed to feel good about … but there's all this stuff that's not being talked about as it relates to the real world."[340] Wilson's perception of both the museum and American society acts as a patent "salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multinational division of labour" that, according to Homi Bhabha, define the present postcolonial era.[341]

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[338] Leslie King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 28.
[339] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 37-8.
[340] Leslie King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 28-9.
[341] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routldge, 1994, 6.

Cognizant of Wilson's experience in museums as well as his familiarity with the neighborhood from his childhood years, the Bronx Council for the Arts hired him to start the Longwood Arts Gallery. This opportunity allowed Wilson to really formulate and materialize his ideas about museums and galleries. Wilson organized the exhibition *Rooms with a View: The Struggle between Culture and Content and the Context of Art*, 1987, in which he "curated" work of fellow contemporary artists by displaying it in three different contexts. By playing with the design of each room, Wilson created three storylines that led the viewer to generate chronological and cultural assumptions for each object although all the artwork was contemporary. The audience was easily fooled and the show constituted an eye-opening experience, a lesson on the ideological power of curatorship and its consequences. After this installation Wilson began a phase of "mockery," wherein he invented "ideal" museums in works such as *Colonial Collection* (1990), and *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art* (1992). As noted by Corrin, Maurice Berger, and especially Darby English and Jennifer González, these initial experiments were critical to Wilson's later and less explicit work, involving working with real objects from the institutions themselves.[342] Wilson recalls that *Rooms with a View* at Longwood was a critical work because it brought all his interests together: "the Third World, anthropology, issues of race, art and museums, my interest in

[342] For surveys of Wilson's work that include projects non museum-related see Corrin, "Mining the Museum," and Maurice Berger, "Viewing the Invisible: Fred Wilson's Allegories of Absence and Loss," *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, Maurice Berger with contributions by Fred Wilson and Jennifer González, Issues in Cultural Theory 4, Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001, 8-20. Both González and English provide more specific and detailed analysis of the early stage of mockery in Wilson's career . Please see Jennifer González, "Siting Histories: Material Culture and the Politics of Display in the Work of Fred Wilson, Pepón Ososrio, and Amalia Mesa-Bains 1985-1995," Phd diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 1996, 197-267, and Darby English, "Black Artists, Black Art? Regarding Difference in Three Dimensions," Phd diss., University of Rochester, 2002, 129-185.

space…Art/Artifact opened up a month after my show …. Around that time James Clifford's *Predicament of Culture* came out. There must have been something in the air..."[343]

There was certainly something in the air. The metonymical quality of museums made them a favorite target of the widespread critique of cultural representation that peaked in the 1980s.[344] Such a discussion translated to an extensive blanket of critical sources upon which Dion and many others drew, and still draw, to inform their own contributions to the debate. To Wilson, however, these writings came only to confirm what he already knew:

> I didn't read that [*The Predicament of Culture*] before I came up with [*Rooms with a View*], basically that was confirming a lot of my thinking at that time... It was really my own journey …I had to eventually make peace with that, find it interesting, and valuable, and use it, making really painful experiences into something helpful and fruitful, I wish I could footnote people better, but that's not how it happened … and I'm still the same way, I read a lot of things, but I'm not reading things that are telling me what to do.[345]

Wilson's first-hand experience with cultural difference was so powerful that it defied theory. But instead of victimizing himself by blaming his minority status on a fixed tradition, he responded creatively through his own artistic practice. Following Bhabha, Wilson's ability to translate a painful situation into something fruitful reflects the possibility of going *beyond* his borderline condition "in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the

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[343] King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 31. *Art/Artifact*, the show that Wilson refers to, was curated by Susan Vogel at the Center of African Art. It raised issues similar to Wilson's by displaying African objects in the context of the white cube. For a detailed discussion see Susan Vogel, "Always true to the object," Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991, 191-204.

[344] Anthropology's self-critique in the mid 1980s is perhaps the most revealing sign that cultural representation required change at an institutional level. As the discipline that deals most directly with culture it had to redefine what such a concept meant. For specific details on the anthropological crisis see James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986 and George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986.

[345] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

political conditions of the present."[346] The result of such a practice is a hybrid cultural space, an interstice that breaks with the past to become a place of both invention and intervention.

By portraying Wilson as an historical witness who does not need theory to act creatively, I do not mean to suggest that artists such as Dion (or Smithson), who rely more directly on critical writings, let those materials tell them what to do. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Dion approaches theory either practically or metaphorically, but never literally. Likewise, I do not intend to assign hierarchical value to the nature of each artist's encounters with otherness. The neo-colonial structure that Bhabha describes operates at different levels and in different types of communities, not exclusively in those where issues of race and ethnicity are at stake. It is that pervasiveness which ensures the structure's persistence. Julia Kristeva clarifies this point in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*. Although she refers to the experience of exile, she insists on the share of suffering induced by *any* uprooting as a driving force to work differently: "sometimes it is the story of a betrayal, sometimes an execution, but in any case, if the feeling of being uprooted and the ensuing pain—the pain of reintegration—are not experienced, there can be no creative work of any kind."[347]

The ensuing pain of Dion has mostly to do with the implications of blurring the frontiers of art practice with those of biology and archaeology, both in the United States and abroad. Although he takes Smithson's example and no longer finds resistance from the art world (that was Smithson's greatest pain), the reception of his work shows how many viewers still insist on separating art from science, real from fake, old from contemporary,

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[346] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3. In his analysis, Bhabha takes the example of artists Renée Greene, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Pepón Osorio, who also act creatively upon the ethnic and cultural borders that they inhabit.

[347] Julia Kristeva, "Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: An Interview," *de-, dis-, ex-.*, vol. 2 (1998): 16.

local from foreign.[348] Thus, while Dion may have come to personally experience strangeness through his artistic practice, Wilson came later in his life to recognize his artistic genealogies and the hardships that came along with them. Despite the different routes and speeds that each artist took, they have both gone beyond the uniqueness of their uprooting experiences to construct a new hybrid site of creative intervention. What makes his story more perverse than Dion's or Smithson's, is that Wilson has always felt out of context due to the color of his skin. Unlike other situations of discrimination, the racial one is not only visible but also indifferent to age and profession.

In sum, to Dion the underlying principle of his work is not archaeology or nature, but the grammar of power and domination ruling representations of both. Similarly, while many of Wilson's museum-related installations deal with racial issues, his work is ultimately not about blackness but about the social relations that still make blackness an issue in American society.[349] According to the artist:

> The underlying connection between all the works is my interest in perception. The topical issues are merely a vehicle for making one aware of one's own perceptual shift, which is the real thrill. This has far-reaching implications for the individual that go beyond the subject of an exhibition.[350]

This is why Wilson can dialogue with Dion and with all other artists who for one reason or another, question the neo-colonial relations that operate within modernity's structure of

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[348] Although his international archaeology projects had an overall positive reception from the public, Dion faced situations of heightened nationalism in both Venice and London. During our conversation at Beach Lake, 19 August 2004, he recalled " this woman in Glasgow who kind of had a nervous breakdown during one of my lectures, yelling at me saying how would you like it if someone came in to your place and started talking about your culture… and well you know, I pay money for that all the time, I love to go and hear experts from all over the world who have insight into my culture, but she ended up having to get restrained by the security guards, it was really bad." For the Venice episode see Emi Fontana, "Loot," *Mark Dion: Archaeology*, eds. Alex Coles and Mark Dion, European Union: Blackdog Publishers, 1999, 46-57.

[349] Cfr. English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," 119. The author makes a similar analysis in relation to other contemporary black artists.

[350] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 34.

power. This is also why Wilson's work resonates so vividly with archaeology's self-critique. Both the artist and archaeologists inhabit interstitial spaces in which they let the museum *and* archaeology, respectively, unfold as the products of colonialism in a postcolonial era.

Art, Archaeology and the Museums Debate

Wilson was not alone in realizing the ideological power of museums. As noted earlier, the critique of museum dynamics stems from the wider crisis of identity in culture that developed fully in the 1980s onwards. It would be out of the scope of this research to address the museum debate entirely. In the following pages I instead briefly chart the changes in the idea of the museum in order to better comprehend the role of Wilson and archaeological critical discussion within this debate.[351]

The origins of museums can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when European explorers brought objects back from newly discovered lands and placed them in cabinets of curiosities as miniature representations of a harmonic universe.[352] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the birth of nation states marked the shift from private to public collections housed in museums. While the items on display were open to everyone, giving the illusion of a classless society, they also worked as a means of exhibiting a universal variety of objects brought back from the colonies and rationalized as national wealth.[353] At the same time, the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of anthropology as a discipline meant to comprehend the otherness of the colonial subjects themselves. One of the

[351] Donald Presiozi and Claire Farago recently published an anthology of essays representative of the nearly forty years of scholarly discussion. See *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004.

[352] For further details see, for example, Anthony Shelton, "Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collections and the Incorporation of the New World," *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 177-203.

[353] A deep analysis of museums of this kind is given in Allan Wallach and Carol Duncan, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History*, vol. 3, nº4 (December 1980): 448-69.

most frequently quoted definitions of culture in anthropology comes from Sir Edward B. Tylor who, in 1871, wrote: "culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[354] Based on his belief in the psychic unity of humankind, Tylor regarded culture as a single and unique body of information of which different societies had varying amounts.[355] By the same token, museums hindered cultural diversity by placing objects of non-Western cultures together, but at the same time far from the material expressions of the civilized colonizers.

At the turn of the twenty-first century national survey museums still abound throughout the world, and although they no longer subscribe to Tylor's definition of culture, little has really changed. As suggested by Martin Prösler, museums today act as symbols of national cohesion wherein they re-interpret the diverse products of the nation within universalized categories of a globalization process.[356] Thus, regardless of the historical period under revision, it becomes apparent that museums serve culturally specific ideologies and agendas. Leone has written extensively on how museums directly distort the distant and recent past as a means of legitimating contemporary sectorial interests.[357] His critique runs parallel to Michel Foucault's analysis of the tensions that generate from the political status of

[354] Quoted in Jon McGee, R. and Richard L. Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, California, London, and Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000, 27.

[355] Such belief was based on evolutionary assumptions very popular at the time. Like many other contemporary anthropologists, Tylor was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's work on the origin of species, which led him to view cultural evolution as a progressive struggle both in technological and moral terms.

[356] Martin Prösler, "Museums and Globalization," *The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review* (1996): 22-44.

[357] See, for example, Mark P. Leone, Parker B. Potter, Jr., and Paul A. Shackel, "Toward a Critical Archaeology," *Current Anthropology* vol. 28, nº3 (1987): 283-302 and Mark P. Leone, "A Historical Archaeology of Capitalism," *American Anthropologist* 97, nº2 (1995): 251-268.

those who have control over knowledge.[358] This is as simple as how artifacts are removed from history, turned into commodities, and later assembled and presented in museums, following an aesthetic system intended to create meanings for the viewing visitor through a well-defined narrative. According to Carol Duncan, the experience of "reading" those fixed narratives, embodies the characteristics of a ritual difficult to bypass.[359] Moreover, distorted rituals are accentuated when those being represented are located at a distance, both temporally and spatially, from the tropes of power. The critical point of this argument states that whatever subject is represented, such representation is the product of a practice executed during the time and place of those able to exercise authority. And therefore, the objects found in museums tell us more about their managers than about their original producers.

According to current anthropological discourse, we should find ourselves in an era of multivocality and cultural pluralism that is also reflected in the museum world, at least on a rhetorical level. Despite the continuity of survey museums, from the 1980s onwards there have been experiments of institutions involved with living-communities (e.g., Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans).[360] To Steven Lavine the range in the nature of these new sets of museum-community relations points to the fact that "as a society, we are debating how much difference is tolerable and desirable."[361] His words describe the inherent ambivalence in colonial discourse wherein, according to Bhabha, otherness "is at

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[358] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

[359] Carol Duncan, "Art museums and the ritual of citizenship," *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 88-103.

[360] A thorough summary of the debate can be found in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

[361] Steve D. Lavine, "Museum Practices," *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, eds. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 156.

once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity."[362] In the museum, the neo-colonial ambivalence translates to the institution's desire to introduce and be receptive to "difference" (objectified in the living communities), and in their resistance to represent that difference in ways that do not conform to its "original," although not intrinsic, degraded identity. Thus, the paradox reads: we (the institution *and* the public) desire difference in the museum, but on our own terms. This analysis of course extends to those "other" non-living communities that are imagined by the scholar on the basis of their archaeological material culture.

To Wilson his "mining" of museums "could mean 'mining' as in a gold mine—digging up something rich with meaning; or as in landmine—exploding myths and perceptions; or, it could mean making it mine."[363] This strategy enables the artist to confront us with the institution's and the public's latent ambivalence towards cultural difference and thereby to test the limits of what is tolerable and desirable in our society. Wilson builds on a visual tradition that dates back to Duchamp and Dada, resurfaces in early Conceptual art and earthworks of the 1960s and 1970s and continues today with the critical work of Dion, himself, and of their contemporaries.[364] Until Wilson's generation, art practice concentrated on denouncing, condemning and describing the problems inherent in the museum's dynamics rather than acting upon them. Today, the critique shifted to a more constructive phase in which artists collaborate with institutions as an attempt to make them hybrid places of creative experience. As Berger notes "Wilson is neither the enemy of the museum, nor its

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[362] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 67.
[363] Fred Wilson, "The Silent Message of the Museum," *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher, London: Kala Press, 1991, 154.
[364] Corrin provides a thoughtful analysis of the developments until the early 1990s, one that is supplemented by English up to the turn of the twenty first century. See Corrin, "Mining the Museum," and English, "Black Artists, Black Art?"

detractor. He is, instead, its brilliant allegorist, building memorials to its lost history that are, at the same time, ciphers of the revolutions and reassessments taking place within its walls."[365]

Shanks and Tilley are among the archaeologists who have joined the museum debate making explicit relations between curatorial practices and the act of presenting the archaeological past. Upon surveying the aesthetics of a group of British museums they demonstrated that institutions preserve the present not the past. In other words, the past takes the place of the colonial subject while the archaeologist-curator the one of the colonizer. The archaeologists suggested a series of concrete techniques to achieve a "redemptive aesthetic for the museum," one that involves "a more fertile relation between past artifact and presentation, one which recognizes and assumes that the study of the past artifact and its present-ation [sic] are inseparable."[366] Interestingly, those techniques are similar to the "mining" strategies that Wilson deployed at the Maryland Historical Society and at The Seattle Art Museum installations. These included the introduction of political content into conventional displays; the breakage of artifacts from fixed chronological narrative and original contexts through juxtaposition and montage; the introduction of 'objective third person narrative' with "exaggeration, irony, humour, absurdity"; the emphasis on authored short-term displays; and the establishment of ties with the community to encourage the construction of their own pasts.[367]

Wilson did not inform his projects with the work of Shanks and Tilley, "I wasn't thinking of archaeology at all, I thought about anthropology a lot, not archaeology, until only

[365] Berger, "Viewing the Invisible," 20.
[366] Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987], 69.
[367] Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing*, 98-9.

recently."[368] In the next section I discuss the work of Wilson in relation to the paradigm of Shanks and Tilley. Rather than reading the artist's work as a mere illustration of this proposal, I look at the very process of materializing an intellectual critique in three-dimensional form, something that remains to be seen within the field of archaeology. Likewise, instead of discussing the specific subject of *Mining the Museum* or *Mixed Metaphors*—race and survey museum exhibition styles, respectively—I focus on the far-reaching implications of each show for archaeological practice.

Mining the Museum and Mixing Metaphors

Critics and scholars agree that *Mining the Museum* marks the high point in Wilson's career. According to Corrin:

> Wilson's exhibit represented a departure from the 'museumism' genre. For it is one thing to talk about race and museums in an alternative space or a hip commercial gallery, but it is quite another to address it in an established museum by using its own collection and its own history.[369]

The element of surprise and innovation not only brought a lot of press, but also granted *Mining the Museum* the American Association of Museum's Curator's Committee Award for Exhibition of the Year and the George Wittenborn prize for outstanding scholarship and publication design. Several other recognitions followed, including the choice of Wilson as the American representative at the United States Pavillion, 50th Venice Biennale, 2003, and The MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant, 1999.

Mining the Museum was commissioned by The Contemporary Museum in conjunction with the Maryland Historical Society (MDHS). At the time of the exhibition, The Contemporary was an experimental museum with no permanent location in the city of

[368] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.
[369] Corrin, "Mining the Museum," 8.

Baltimore. Key to its mission was the presentation of contemporary artwork in collaboration with artists in host institutions and/or unexpected locations as a way of bringing art directly to diverse and under-served communities. When they invited Fred Wilson to create an installation, the artist chose the MDHS, the oldest and one of the most conservative institutions in the state of Maryland. Both institutions agreed to relinquish their control over the project and the MDHS gave Wilson free range of action.

While in residence, Wilson had access to every aspect of the collection, being literally capable to use the museum as his palette: "curators, whether they think about it or not, really create how you are to view and think about these objects, so I figured 'If they can do it, I can do it too.' Everything in the exhibition environment is mine, whenever I organize the space."[370] The process of production was as important as the final outcome, which is why Wilson involved the local community by working with independent volunteers who had expertise in African-American local and state history, astronomy, and museum history. In addition, he gave talks to the docents volunteering for the show both before and after the exhibition opened.

The show took over the third floor of the building, but in the main lobby a videotape acted as a "signed curator's statement" wherein Wilson declared that the installation represented his own vision of the Maryland Historical Society. In the lobby of the exhibition itself, the public immediately encountered a series of empty pedestals, one of them supporting a silver globe with the word TRUTH, c.1913 (Fig. 35). This kind of trophy was popular through the 1930s and they served as prizes for "truth" in advertising. According to Wilson this piece summarized the spirit of the installation, hence its location: "the intention

[370] Karp, Ivan and Fred Wilson, "Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums," *Thinking About Exhibitions,* eds. Reesa Greenberg; Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 253.

in having the word 'truth' as the first thing you saw, was that the work should speak to the notion of truth, to ask if there is truth and whose truth."[371] The lobby gave access to five rooms arranged somehow thematically. The first featured the prehistoric and Native American presence in Maryland. The second room displayed "talking" paintings, as a reference to the sound effects that Wilson incorporated in them in order to interrogate the viewer about the social relations between African-Americans and Anglo Americans depicted on the canvases. The third room included displays of objects of the everyday life organized by function (transport) or material (metal, wood). Room four consisted of a corridor displaying objects made by enslaved African-Americans and by Africans from Liberia. The final room, featured objects relative to the "aspirations, dreams and achievements" of African-Americans both in and outside slavery.

I would like to bring attention to two specific displays in the third room: "Metalwork 1793-1880" and "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960." Unlike other displays of the installation where Wilson brought pieces that did not belong to the Society (e.g., photographs of Native Americans from Maryland) or altered its original objects (e.g., talking paintings), these two displays are representative of Wilson's material activity upon the environment only.[372] The "hand" of the artist was limited to the red paint in the walls, the signage, and most importantly, the disposition of the objects. Wilson brought together pieces of the collection that were previously on display or in storage, but never in close proximity. "Metalwork 1793-1880" consisted of a plexiglass case that included silver vessels—chalices, tureens, and tumblers—in Baltimore Repoussé style along with iron slave shackles (Fig. 36).

[371] Wilson, "The Silent Message," 154.
[372] For discussion on other portions of the show, see for example Corrin, "Mining the Museum," English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," Berger, "Viewing the Invisible," and González, "Siting Histories."

"Cabinetmaking 1820-1960" featured a raised platform with a whipping post on top, surrounded by period arm and side chairs of different styles (Fig. 37).[373]

Wilson's strategy of juxtaposing objects that the MDHS had deemed foreign to one another sought to demonstrate how "history is not separate the way we make it, and we should make it that much more complete by placing things of the same historic nature together."[374] Wilson did not group things for the sake of their historical coincidence only, but to problematize the network of social relationships in which they are embedded within the confines of a single historical period. Furthermore, Wilson made it clear that regardless of their historic nature, artifacts never cease to be part of networks of social relations, including the ones they establish with the MDHS and with himself. The artist's strategy was so effective that "Metalwork" and "Cabinetmaking" are the pieces most celebrated by scholars and critics. According to Ira Berlin "nowhere is the complex interplay of the one and many more evident," while to Judith E. Stein "Wilson effects a strong and chilling awareness of the institution of slavery."[375]

Through the juxtapositions Wilson addressed two types of negations on the part of the MDHS. First, the denial of historical relations between coexisting objects as seen in "Metalwork 1793-1880." While the repoussé and the shackles had been previously on

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[373] Additionally, my knowledge of Wilson's work came long after the exhibition closed. I only witnessed "Cabinetmaking" as the fragment that represented *Mining the Museum* in Wilson's retrospective "Objects and Installations 1979-2000" at The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in 2001 (the show toured different venues until 2004). I do not believe that the site-specificity of the show cancels my approach to it through documentary sources, but I do think that it limits the extent of my analysis. In this sense, I agree with the comment of Ivan Karp: "I regard *Mining the Museum* as one of the most extraordinary things that I've ever seen … It is a wonderful example of art as a political challenge linked to a specific site, not only because of the specific displays but because of the way it works within the museum itself. This is an exhibit that you cannot fully appreciate unless you see the rest of the museum as well as the exhibit." Karp and Wilson, "Constructing the Spectacle," 265.

[374] Fred Wilson, "Mining the Museum," Slide Lecture, Seattle Art Museum, April 1992.

[375] Ira Berlin, "*Mining the Museum* and The Rethinking of Maryland's History," *Mining the Museum, An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Corrin, 44; Judith E. Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum," November 2003, Slought Foundation Online Archives http://slought.org/content/1083/

display, they had never been next to each other. Wilson forced the viewer to reflect about the context of production and circulation of these objects both during their active everyday life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also after their discard during their handling by the MDHS. Metalwork reveals the economic aspect of the social relations at work. The use of tableware and shackles was exclusive to masters and slaves respectively, but their production was not. Slaves not only were responsible for transforming iron into shackles, but also had to make tableware that they were never allowed to use. Likewise, the MDHS today owns the objects and therefore has the power to organize the contexts of their consumption by the viewers. *Mining the Museum* enabled Wilson temporarily to own the objects and choose a different storyline and context of consumption for them.

Alternatively, Wilson addressed the denial of objects that tacitly remind us of relations that the institution chooses to suppress. This is the case of "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960." While the chairs had been on view before, the whipping post had remained in the storage facility since it was acquired in 1960. The post was used in front of the Baltimore city jail until 1938 as a testament to Maryland's legal code that made several crimes—by black and white, servant and free—qualify for lash punishment. As noted by Corrin, one staff member at the MDHS did recall some of these stories and was "visibly upset" by Wilson's decision to put it on display.[376] The suppression of the slaves' rights in the post echoes the MDHS's suppression of the post itself. The institution becomes the master of disenfranchised viewers by deploying a different—yet similar—kind of violence. Because Wilson juxtaposed the post with stylish chairs, he directed the reading of the installation towards the master and slave relation only. By inverting the terms of the relationship, Wilson became the master of his own story as well.

[376] Corrin, "Mining the Museum," 22, fn. 50.

While exposing hidden objects Wilson revealed a private shame of the MDHS that recalls Dion's archaeology projects. The crucial difference between the two artists is that Dion exposed ugly and/or unseen aspects of the archaeological endeavor through the fake, while Wilson showed the ugliness and opaque practices of racism and the MDHS through the real. Because Wilson literally used the museum as his palette, he made no mockery, and that alone made the message more powerful. Wilson physically displaced objects that were already there demonstrating that the very act of (dis)placement has enduring consequences. Moreover, displacing is a tactic not exclusive to Wilson; he was in fact mimicking a curatorial strategy already at work at the MDHS and that also extends to other types of institutions that display different kinds of objects. Berlin notes how: "the historical meaning of racism's transit is found not in the artifacts in the past but in the way men and women invested them with meaning, meaning derived from their relationships with one another and to the context in which they are found."[377] Wilson positioned himself within that network of social relationships, admitting that by displacing and juxtaposing objects he invested them with new meanings.

A key element in Wilson's mediation with the objects at the MDHS was his African-American background: "because it details [the exhibition] the period of slavery, since it goes through that period, it was a very painful experience for me, being African American. But also it was actually the catharsis for being able to actually do the exhibition."[378] During the process of producing the installation Wilson encountered the information in ways that made an impact on its outcome: "Baltimore was, for me, really the nineteenth century. I was going through manumission papers, the logs of slaves, and the letters … but I was also struck by

[377] Berlin, "The Rethinking of Maryland's History," 45.
[378] Wilson, "Mining the Museum," 14.

the wealth that was there. Seeing the *juxtaposition* of these things was really painful."[379] Intentionally or not, Wilson acted as the spokesperson of the extensive African-American community in Baltimore who experienced a catharsis merely by walking through the exhibit. One docent indeed recalls that "many blacks came through *Mining the Museum* and cried."[380]

Wilson's personal, emotional connection with the object of the MDHS poses an interesting tension with his professional persona. The mix of an artist outsider of the institution, yet close to the objects held in it, is not that different from Dion as the dilettante archaeologist who went native in *New England Digs*. Like Dion, Wilson used both aspects as assets to bridge past and present; he overturned the Anglo-American way of deleting sensitive issues from the nation's identity. However, while in Dion's dig the exclusion of Native Americans "returned to haunt us" through its very exclusion, at the MDHS the exclusion of African Americans returned to haunt us through its very presence. Wilson put African and Anglo-American artifacts side by side, something that Dion could not do because Native American objects never entered his project. Incidentally, Wilson's installation addressed Maryland Indians in only one room for the same reason: he works with what is already available in the institution's collection. Thus, the exclusion of Native Americans once again returned to haunt us on its literal erasure from the MDHS and ultimately from the East Coast.

Despite the gravity of the Native American issue, its invisibility favors denial over acceptance, silence over discussion. From this perspective, one of the merits of Wilson's project lies in its taking place in a city with a significant African American community. The dynamics of racial inequality that transpired from the show incited dialogue in the here and

[379] King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 33. Emphasis is mine.
[380] Lisa G. Corrin, ed., "Mining the Project Experiences: A Discussion with the Docents of the Maryland Historical Society," *Mining the Museum, An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Corrin, 49.

now. And even then, Wilson was careful to present his own story as a constructed story, his personal point of view of historic Maryland. The artist chose to pose questions rather than to offer answers inviting the audience to construct individual stories. The material objects of the collection helped ground and direct Wilson's narrative, but he showed that the narrative is ultimately what one—anyone—can make out of the objects.

Mixed Metaphors, was the third installation in which Wilson intervened an institution, this time the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). Prior to opening a new downtown facility, SAM invited the artist to create an installation using its permanent collection as a "firm commitment to many voices and points of view in the galleries and to many levels of art interpretation."[381] Although the project was envisioned earlier than *Mining the Museum*, in 1991, *Mixed Metaphors* opened after the Baltimore show, receiving considerably less press coverage and scholarly attention. Since Wilson applied the same "mining" logic of the former exhibition his strategies were no longer surprising or shocking. Furthermore, SAM holds a collection of over 23,000 objects from virtually every continent that span from ancient times until today. Wilson did not have the emotional ties that he experienced with the MDHS's collection and in that respect, *Mixed Metaphors* was not a cathartic affair. But regardless of Wilson's personal detachment, I am interested in what he made out of the specificity of SAM. In a lecture about his work at SAM, prior to starting the project, the artist said:

> I'm not really sure exactly what I'm going to do, and I like that position. I like to come and be totally surprised and enthused by new things because it's such a different kind of collection [from MDHS]. I'm sure that'll happen. Already I've been wandering around a bit, just wondering (laughter) what I was going to do. So we'll see.[382]

[381] Jay Gates, "Foreword," *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors, Fred Wilson*, Patterson Sims, Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993, 1.
[382] Wilson, "Mining the Museum," 18.

Wilson's project followed rules similar to those he used in Maryland. His on-site research lasted eight weeks between 1992 and early 1993. As the MDHS, SAM gave Wilson access to all parts of the museum, including storage. He also met with staff, local artists, and others to learn about the museum and the community (Fig. 38 and Fig. 39). Unlike *Mining the Museum*, *Mixed Metaphors* consisted of a series of installations that Wilson interspersed throughout the third and fourth floor of SAM. According to Patterson Sims, the curator of the show, this strategy was "both practical and theoretical. There was no small, self-contained changing exhibition space available in the museum, and so this assimilation of Wilson's work permitted his ideas to be both invisible and omnipresent."[383] Wilson's intervention was signaled by the logo MM to draw attention to and signify the exhibition's title, and a special map also served to guide visitors through MM (Fig. 40).

Sims notes that the installation "asked the viewer to reconsider the implications and assumptions of art museum installations, even one as freshly and thoroughly thought out as the Seattle Art Museum's new downtown facility."[384] Because of the wide scope of the museum's collection, Wilson's installations covered diverse subject matters, of which I will discuss only two: "Push" and "Re-Seeing Modernism."[385] Both displays featured objects that were either contemporary or from the recent past. In this way the public could more easily relate to them in ways not experienced with objects from distant times or regions. "Push" dealt with objects that belonged to the museum but that were not part of the collection

[383] Patterson Sims, "Metamorphosing Art / Mixing the Museum," *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*, Patterson Sims, Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993, 10.
[384] Sims, "Metamorphosing Art," 9.
[385] The totality of the installations included: "Push," "Egypt and/in Africa," "Early European Art," "Nineteenth Century Art in Native and European America," "Re-Seeing Modernism," "Foreign Faces," "African MTV and Architecture," "Downtown Lagos," "A Portrait Head Among Masks," "Three Drug Jars," "An Altarpiece for Mesoamerica," "Monitors and Masks." For further discussion on each see Sims, "Metamorphosing Art," English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," and González, "Siting Histories."

such as an emergency exit door, a fire extinguisher, a fire alarm, and a water fountain. Wilson highlighted these artifacts, treating them as if they were part of the museum's collection (Fig. 41). To add to the confusion of what was and what was not worthy of the collection, Wilson placed a plaque on the water fountain with the words FRED WILSON to invoke donors' naming of galleries. By relocating the spotlight and adding letterwork, Wilson transformed utilitarian objects of today's everyday life into aesthetic commodities. He led the viewer to wonder whether other objects of the collection had also been commodified. This strategy of giving importance to the unimportant recalls Dion's classifications of ordinary objects at the Thames and New England. Dealing with daily objects allowed both artists to make their arbitrary decisions evident. They were in fact so overtly arbitrary that they were absurd and humorous, despite the seriousness of their implications for the discipline or institution.

In "Re-Seeing Modernism" Wilson successfully exemplified the flip side of the coin by regrouping works from the collection normally on view in the gallery of modernist European and U.S. artists 1910-1950. Wilson created a particularly persuasive installation in a room where he painted two walls in the same dark green color of the largest African gallery. He also built a raised platform similar to those in the African and Native American galleries on which he placed the modernist artwork. The pieces were not arranged according to their media and some of them obstructed views of others (Fig. 42). Since the platform looked crowded and anonymous, Wilson provided a schematic "map" with the silhouettes of the objects for identification, often the norm in non-Western displays. The disposition of the pieces as well as the ambiance and labels transformed the "artworks" into mere "artifacts." All of a sudden there was no distinction between European sculptures and their African

inspirational models. The arbitrariness of this maneuver did not spark humor in the audience. According to Sims: "this installation was cited by several museum visitors as the most disturbing aspect of *Mixed Metaphors* because it was initially seen not as a Wilson addition but as an inverted—and profoundly insensitive—variant of the museum's style of installation."[386]

The reaction of the public attests to the emotional aspect of the show. Wilson may have not had personal ties with the material, but he was capable of making the exhibition personal to some members of the public. As one viewer commented:

> Marvelous! I was walking around very proud of myself that I got the joke and didn't have to be enlightened until I got to where all the modern European art was bunched up in the corner the way the art of other cultures always is, and I got irritated. These idiots squished the Picabia back in the corner where I can't see it! Touché—an exhibit that is not only very informative but funny and damn irritating (the reality, that is—not the exhibit).[387]

The mix of anger and humor revealed in the statement exemplifies the colonial paradox suggested by Bhabha. The paradox operates on two levels, the relationship between artist and institution and the relationship between West and non-West. When the installations are clearly understood as the artist's creation, the viewer accepts them, despite the canons that it might contest. Moreover, the viewer reacts with humor, referring to the mixed metaphor as a "joke." When the authorship of the installation is not realized, however, the viewer reacts with disdain, cataloguing the mixed metaphor as an "offense" on the part of the institution. The resistance to "jokes" increases if the objects in question are originally Western and highly valued as artwork. Wilson tests the limits of how much change to the *status quo* our society is willing to tolerate and desire, not only coming from artists but also from institutions.

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[386] Sims, "Metamorphosing Art," 22.
[387] Quoted on Sims, "Metamorphosing Art," 5.

To examine further the split in the public's response to *Mixed Metaphors*, one might consider the artist's own words: "when one depicts another you invariably end up depicting yourself. That, I feel, is the perfect metaphor for 'the museum' itself. "[388] Indeed, Wilson's work reads as a joke when the artifacts of an installation act as a metaphor of the viewers *themselves* being "upgraded" to an advantageous position (contemporary utilitarian objects treated as artwork). However, when the installation touches upon West/non-West relations, the audience reads it as an offense; the viewers see *themselves* in the cluttered masterpieces now downgraded to the status of "artifact." The public also realizes in the process that the very act of degrading lies outside the objects or subjects in question, which is not a laughing matter. Additionally, the audience may see itself in a not-so-amicable position within the historical relationship between "us," the Western degrader, and "them," the non-Western degraded, decreasing the hilarity of the installation.

Although after *Mining the Museum* Wilson's strategies themselves are no longer unexpected, whether or not they are effective depends on the specificity of the venues in which they take place as well as in Wilson's ability to creatively articulate each of them as an interstitial space. *Mixed Metaphors* did not touch upon a subject as sensitive as racism and slavery, rather it centered on the very logics of exhibition styles. Wilson took advantage of the wide range of the collection to underscore the value systems associated with different objects and their modes of display. What may have seemed an eclectic and uninteresting show was really a powerful statement against stylistic conventions that as viewers we are too comfortable with to begin to challenge.[389] Unlike English, who downplays the effectiveness of the installation arguing that "nothing was unearthed, nothing was altered, there were no

[388] Wilson, "The Silent Message," 160.
[389] English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," 178.

fractions; everything was presented as wholly intact as Wilson found it, just someplace else," I believe that such minimalism on Wilson's part makes his proposal stronger.[390] Moreover, it encourages the viewer to think of the implications that go beyond the subject of his exhibitions.

Taking advantage of their own site-specificities, both *Mining the Museum* and *Mixed Metaphors* contributed to making the museum a place of controversy by promoting an active reception of the institution's curatorial dynamics. While giving three-dimensional form to the museum's critique, Wilson also opened it up to the average non-specialist museum-goer. From this perspective, I agree with English that "were it not for Wilson's work, viewers who encounter it might not know that critical anthropology and post-colonial studies have invoked questions with grave implications for the museum's unquestioned preservative function."[391] Wilson's "practical lessons" are in fact the realization of Shanks's and Tilley's redemptive aesthetic for the museum. One can recognize most, if not all, the techniques suggested by the archaeologists. Not only did Wilson introduce political content to each show, but he also took responsibility for his actions, broke artifacts from fixed narratives through juxtaposition (but instead of merely separating objects from original contexts, he also brought them together), involved the community in the making of the exhibits, introduced "objective third person narrative" with exaggeration and humor, and made time bound shows.

González rightly characterizes Wilson's work as a mode of "conceptual materialism" that along the work of other contemporary artists, such as Dion and Smithson, marks a "a shift in historical representation from an emphasis on written texts to an emphasis on visual

[390] English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," 176.
[391] English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," 114.

texts and material display."[392] Her analysis follows Walter Benjamin's "unorthodox" notion of historical materialism, one that González finds applicable to the work of Wilson since they both consider the concrete traces of the material world as key components of historical discourse. Their task as historians and artists, therefore, is to use that evidence as "revolutionary disruption" in order to chart a new configuration of identity and history.[393] Shanks and Tilley share this view when articulating their redemptive aesthetic for the museum, and they also insist upon the temporal quality of material reality.[394] Wilson uses the materiality of curatorial practice to highlight its ideological power. Moreover, in the process of doing so, he indirectly replicates the practice of archaeology, which is also material and in a permanent state of historical becoming. This may be the most critical and far-reaching implication of Wilson's work for the discipline of archaeology, but at the same time, the least obvious one.

Archaeology is often regarded as a practice that deals with material reality leaving no concrete traces itself. Consequently, the political act of interpretation appears as having to do with tangible objects but not with the opaque practices that accompany those objects, nor with the particular agents who participate in those practices. Wilson's work proves otherwise. His creative process includes successive interpretive acts with both ideological and material consequences, such as the selection, classification, registration and movement of objects for their final display. Although many of these practices are indeed ephemeral and leave little behind, Wilson demonstrates that a practice does not have to be overtly

[392] González, "Siting Histories," 414-15, fn 608.
[393] González, "Siting Histories," 416-17.
[394] Shanks and Tilley rely on different works by Benjamin to support their understanding of material reality and history.

flamboyant to be heavily political and, most importantly, he demonstrates that interpretations are not just mental operations:

> I think what happens in the exhibition process, and it's not just archaeology, it's art, anthropology…scholars know their fields through certain means, you think that because archaeologists look at certain things would be able to understand the visual communication happening, but essentially it's a kind of intellectual experience rather than a visual experience …. and on top of that exhibitions are a communication device and people are not used to using that as a communication device, just on a superficial level, much more in touch with text than with the object so when people make displays they are thinking about the page not really about the room and they hang over the whole thing somewhere else.[395]

The inability of archaeologists to deal with visual communication may in part explain why the redemptive aesthetic for the museum remains only a theory. Considering that Shanks and Tilley are academics, one should not expect them to materialize their redemptive techniques. However, many other archaeologists who work in museum environments have not put them into practice. From this perspective, Wilson adds:

> I think that if I look back that's my little thing that I have given to the field, because there was a lot of writing in anthropology, art history all the critical studies… but it was just writing, no one was putting practice, theory into practice. I needed to do that and luckily, by the time I was able to do things in larger venues, more people could see it and with a lot of writing going on, that people could understand, have a place for it.[396]

So, while Wilson did not unearth, alter, or fracture anything in Seattle, he showed that something as "uninteresting" as moving things around, does *matter*. Archaeology deals with material reality from its own materiality, and those concrete traces are key components of historical discourse.

Be it explicit, as the critique of curatorial dynamics, or implicit, as the replication of archaeological practice, the relationship between Wilson's work and the discipline of

[395] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.
[396] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

archaeology remains largely unnoticed. Irene Winter is one of the few archaeologists, if not the only one, who has written on Wilson: "It is not the materials that 'speak,' but the writer(s) of the narrative. The work of Fred Wilson interrogates some of those prior narratives, and the history they have produced, through a process of re-examination and re-inscription."[397] Winter's comment reflects her ability to look at her practice critically, but most importantly, to recognize that critique in visual form. She further notes that:

> Wilson's 'history' is a history born of archaeology, clearly recognized as a discourse subject to excavation and decipherment. The challenge he poses for governing paradigms and their adherents is not an amateurish glimmer of early post modern un-ease, but a direct, fully developed, late post modern gauntlet flung: the familiar can be defamiliarized via context; the past is a construct; archaeology is not free of ideology; value is contingent; alternative histories can, and will, be written.[398]

Archaeologists are slowly turning from written to visual texts as sources of historical representation. The best example is their attention to the archaeological projects of Mark Dion. Despite the slippage between fiction and reality, however, the implications of Dion's work for the discipline are fully explicit. Paraphrasing Winter, Wilson's work, or any other *non-literal* artwork, challenges archaeologists and non-archaeologists to defamiliarize themselves with the familiar in order to chart a new configuration of their own identity and history, one in which the *presentation* of the past truly unfolds as the material residue of practices not strictly curatorial or artistic, but archaeological.

[397] Irene J. Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit: Archaeology, Value, History in the Work of Fred Wilson," *New Histories*, eds. Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996, 184.
[398] Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit," 189.

What Next: the Aftermath of the Museum Projects

Following Wilson's groundbreaking exhibition at Maryland, several other museums in and outside the United States commissioned the artist to mine their own headquarters. Since 1993 Wilson has intervened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; the British Museum, London; and the Museum of World Cultures, Stockholm, to name a few.[399] Although Wilson has successfully managed to maintain the ethical and epistemological imperative of the original installation, one cannot help wondering: Can there really be a redemptive aesthetic for the museum? Can that redemption extend to the practice of archaeology? What are the odds for deep ideological change?

The Institutions: Life After Fred Wilson

Whenever Wilson mines an institution, he brings to light the power relations that operate in that institution's dynamics. By doing so, the artist provides a new scenario for ideological change, but it is not his responsibility to effect that change. Moreover, the transitory nature of Wilson's installations prevents him from becoming another fixed/authoritative narrative of the institution's permanent collection, forcing those who are affected by the installation—staff and visitors, to make something out of it. I thus agree with English that this "expert evasion of co-optation" is one of the most salient aspects of Wilson's work,

[399] For further details on each please see *OpEd: Fred Wilson*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994, an exhibition catalogue; *Insight: In Site; Incite: Memory, Artists, and the Community*, Winston-Salem, NC: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, 1994, an exhibition catalogue; David Barrett, "Collected: Photographer's Gallery, London," *Frieze*, nº 36 (September-October 1997): 96-7 (Review of *Collected*, Photographer's Gallery, London, for which Wilson created *In Course of Arrangement* at the British Museum's Egyptian Wing); for the recently opened (December 2004) "Site Unseen: Dwellings of Demons," at The Museum of World Cultures, Sweden, see www.varldskulturmuseet.se/content/1/c4/44/04/fred2_title_eng.gif

because it truly allows him to navigate the structure of power and domination in which he is embedded.[400] As the artist notes:

> most of the museums get back to their busy lives and don't really stay in touch with me, and there's no reason to pressure them, I'm moving along with my own projects, but I do stay in touch if they are interested, and I have many friends now in these institutions…. It's not really for me to ask them what has been retained of what I did… but I think it would be an interesting question to ask them.[401]

Wilson is right, to evaluate the impact of his installations in the institutional framework, one must examine both the institutions in which they took place and those who experienced those installations closely.

The windfall of invitations that Wilson received from museums since 1992 points to a strong desire to have him shake up the *status quo*. The reasons behind that desire, however, are twofold. According to Wilson: "I'm brought in because there's a genuine desire to self-reflect and even to change attitudes and policies. Though there may be some people who want to bring me in because they know an exhibition of mine brought in tons of press and (…) visitors."[402] Judging from the aftermath of *Mining the Museum* and *Mixed Metaphors*, both the Maryland Historical Society and the Seattle Art Museum have been capable of furthering Wilson's critique with innovative proposals of their own, attesting to a genuine desire to alter the order of things.

Today The Contemporary Museum has a permanent site in Baltimore, located only meters away from the Maryland Historical Society in the Mt. Vernon cultural district. While The Contemporary remains faithful to their goal of connecting new art to everyday experience, the MDHS is committed to presenting yearly changing exhibitions on diverse

[400] English, "Black Artists, Black Art?," 161.
[401] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.
[402] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 34.

topics in addition to the permanent exhibitions. In one of the current shows, *Looking for Liberty: An Overview of Maryland History,* organizers seek to enable visitors "to experience Marylanders' pursuit of liberty in ways that are compelling and represent a true departure from conventional state history exhibits."[403] Both this exhibition and *What's it to You?: Black History is American History*, 2003, most likely grew directly from the experience of working with Wilson.[404] As a matter of fact, *Mining the Museum* remained partially on view for eight years (January 1994-January 2002). The MDHS kept a fragment of the larger exhibition with the same name in order to acknowledge "curatorial choices and the role of museums as they relate to the representation of African Americans and Native Americans in traditional museum collections."[405] Wilson remained close to the education department:

> people kept coming and they have questions from school children … They kept the baby carriage with the Klan hood in the exhibition and so I remember they once called me and said we had some children come and see the show and some of their parents were in the Klan, so what do we do? Well, so we had one conversation about that.[406]

Most importantly, the Society now has five minorities and ten women on their board.[407] Not only does it represent a significantly higher proportion than a decade ago, but it attests to a will to exchange ideas and keep them flowing. According to Wilson "a sea of change will happen when boards of trustees, curators, and staff look like the audiences the museums want."[408]

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[403] Maryland Historical Society, http://www.mdhs.org/explore/current.html#newexhibits

[404] The show consisted of "highlights of African American life and achievement in Maryland from the late 1600s through 2000. Drawing on the Historical Society's vast collection of Maryland objects … Visitors were encouraged to consider how these objects related to their own lives as part of American history." http://www.mdhs.org/explore/pastexhibitions.html

[405] Maryland Historical Society, http://www.mdhs.org/explore/past_exhibitions.html

[406] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

[407] Judith E. Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum," November 2003, Slought Foundation Online Archives http://slought.org/content/1083/

[408] Berger and Wilson, "Collaboration," 37.

At the Seattle Art Museum, *Mixed Metaphors* left no visible trace on the institution's website. Nevertheless, Lisa Corrin is now the Deputy Director of Art and the Jon and Mary Shirley Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. Being the "savvy" curator that SAM wants her to be, she may actively contribute to maintaining the memory of Wilson's work. [409] This is the case of the current exhibition *Africa in America*. Looking at their own holdings, the museum seeks to address the absence of African-American art in American museums and its impact on the African-American museum-goers. The show acts as a corollary to a four-year project in which SAM explored and deepened the dialogue between art and audience. Although represented in the institution's collection, Wilson's work is not on view due to previous exhibition commitments, but the organization of the show invokes his presence:

> (…) Overall, the selection of art by African Americans does not fit neatly together as a cohesive statement regarding style or approach and thereby becomes a counterpoint to the Modern in America selection on the 4th floor. (…) Quotations from several artists about the "double consciousness" of being both African and American are included in the labels. Numerous poignant credit lines appear. Many gifts are named in honor of friends. Several purchases are the results of joined forces, exemplifying a method of pooling funds that often makes collecting possible.[410]

Although the changes introduced by MDHS and SAM indicate that a more tolerant attitude towards difference is finding its way into the institution, the public seems less ready to match this tendency. Let us remember that a visitor to *Mixed Metaphors* characterized Wilson's installations as witty "jokes," but when he mistook them for the staff's creations, he thought they reflected poorly on decisions regarding exhibition style. If the ideological critique is valid insofar as it remains bound to an artist, the real object of desire is Fred Wilson, not the message his work puts forth. Furthermore, desire masks a not so favorable

[409] Seattle Art Museum, http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/visit/OSP/visitOSP.asp
[410] Seattle Art Museum http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibit/exhibitDetail.asp?WHEN=&eventID=7502

attitude towards the artist that helps disclose the darker side of the colonial paradox. As much as the public celebrates the witty artistic aura of Wilson, they also see him as somebody who cannot be taken seriously. Behind this attitude lies people's need to separate art from life, preventing the artist from making any contribution, let alone change, to the social fabric. In other words, Wilson and his work are not really desired, but inscribed in a structure of exclusion. Thus, his work has *itself* been subject to desire and derision, confirming the currency of the colonial paradox that it seeks to highlight.

After *Mining the Museum* institutions know what they are getting themselves into. Even if they come to Wilson to genuinely self-reflect, they face the danger of replicating attitudes experienced by viewers who resist critical thinking outside the limits of an already restricted concept of art. From this viewpoint, the "self"-critique seems safe when it belongs not to them, but to an outsider whose reputation precedes him and does not necessarily express the values and opinions of the institution. That is why the impact of Wilson's work can only be appreciated upon its transcendence, once the installations no longer exist. However, because that transcendence involves acting upon memory, should Wilson continue mining institutions indefinitely, he faces the risk of exhausting the audience and/or institutions, stimulating amnesia rather than critical thinking. And Wilson knows it: "at this point I don't want to repeat myself so I'm really trying to choose museums and collections in cities that really inspire me in another direction, I don't want to repeat myself because it's an easy road."[411] The challenge for both the institutions and Wilson therefore is to remain in a permanent state of historical becoming.

[411] Fred Wilson, interview by the author, November 5, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

Mining Fields, Mixing Approaches: The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity

The possibility to endure ideological change after Wilson's projects represents a challenge for people or institutions that are farther from the realm of contemporary art. This distance partly explains the minimal impact of the artist's work on the discipline of archaeology, which is at the same time its gravest implication. Although Wilson's work on museums targets one of the most public faces of archaeology, his critique to curatorial dynamics does not speak directly or exclusively to archaeologists. Rather, the relation between the two depends on the recognition of a metaphor that extends the power relations embedded in those dynamics to the practice of archaeology as a whole.

Because Wilson's critique takes three-dimensional form, its metaphoric relation to archaeological practice also depends on one's ability to transit from textual to visual sources of historical representation and critical thinking. Within the archaeological world, however, those connections are still too literal and intellectual. The resistance to viewing archaeology as a social endeavor hinders the crossover to other social practices that exert similar dynamics. Wilson's work successfully demonstrates that neither practice—archaeological nor artistic—happens in a vacuum, apart from everyday life; they both have material and ideological consequences. What remains problematic is the limited overlap between archaeology and other fields, restricting its ability to read different texts.

Archaeologist Julian Thomas describes the dialogue between archaeology and art as "an enduring and perennially troubled one."[412] His comment stems from participating in "Object-Excavation-Intervention: Dialogues Between Sculpture and Archaeology," a

[412] Julian Thomas, "Object-Excavation-Intervention: Dialogues Between Sculpture and Archaeology," 3-5 June 2004, Lecture Theatre, Leeds City Art Gallery, *Henry Moore Institute Newsletter*, nº55 (August/September).

conference that united topics and practitioners of both disciplines in the summer of 2004. Thomas continues:

> But while a dialogue is possible, it is far less easy to inhabit two well-established academic traditions simultaneously. For this reason there appeared to be some subtle misunderstandings going on: the art historians in some cases felt that their appreciation of the place of artworks in the process of history had not been fully recognized, while the archaeologists sensed a lack of acknowledgement for their *sophisticated view of the imbrication of materiality and social relations*.
>
> (…) it became clear that the makers of art favoured by archaeologists and art historians didn't always coincide. To an archaeologist, *visual art has the potential to express something about materiality or incarnation that could not be said in words*, rather than to use archaeological materials or situations to create a work that is more abstractedly aesthetic.[413]

Interestingly, while describing the archaeologists' approach to visual art, Thomas also describes the perspective of many artists and art historians on the same matter. Mark Dion, who also participated in the conference, commented:

> it seemed like the artists were very much artists and the archaeologists were very much archaeologists, and there were very few people crossing the boundaries between them or even having a conversation. I thought there were far too many pretty straight archaeological proceedings. *It didn't seem that people were recognizing archaeology as cultural itself*.[414]

Rather than favoring one perspective over the other, insisting on cleansing each discipline's identity, it seems more fruitful to acknowledge that *both* of them seek to understand the "imbrication of materiality and social relations." If each discipline defines the same objective with different names (and methods) the troubling aspect of a dialogue between the two comes down to a matter of *enunciation*. It might be useful to bring up Bhabha's considerations on cultural analysis where he notes that "the theoretical recognition

[413] J. Thomas, Ibid., Emphasis is mine.
[414] Mark Dion, interview by the author, August 19, 2004, Bach Lake, PA. Emphasis is mine.

of the split-space of enunciation [of cultural difference] may open the way to an *inter*culture, based … on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*."[415] Thus, the very act of seeking dialogue between art (history) and archaeology and thereby *inter*disciplinarity occurs in an in-between space of permanent translation and negotiation. The different skills that each field of practice demands open the possibility to exchange information that will expand their range of cultural interrogation. Should a commitment exist within each discipline, it must consider eluding the panic and anxiety inherent in any kind of crossover.

Technically, the discipline of archaeology does not need the work of Wilson, Smithson or Dion to effect ideological change. Archaeology does not need to switch entirely to visual texts as sources of historical representation either. Visual texts embody only one alternative story, a path to defamiliarize the grounds on which the discipline stands and prevents it from moving forward. Smithson, Dion, and Wilson understand that their practice is above all social, and as such, it both shapes and is shaped by the network of relations in which it is embedded. Moreover, the work of all three deals with the unstable nature of this experience. They depart from the stability of material objects to demonstrate that the meaning attached to them is in a constant state of displacement and re-inscription. From this perspective, the fact that the discussion of Wilson's work came last and dealt specifically with interpretation is almost anecdotic, if not for deconstructing its place within the linearity of the archaeological process. While slipping objects from fiction to reality (Dion), absence to presence (Wilson), and experience to memory (Smithson), the artists confront viewers with the discomfort of stories that are never fully written, but that because of it, can be extremely empowering.

[415] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38.

As a counterpoint to the canon, the redemptive aesthetic for the museum may remain in a constant state of tension and negotiation to avoid becoming another aesthetic methodology. A signal of ideological change is indeed disagreement, since it exposes the ongoing processes of displacement and re-inscription of meaning. Likewise, archaeology can only redeem itself by addressing its social and unstable nature within a larger historical context. Archaeologies such as that of Shanks and Tilley venture from textual to visual sources of representation, hence the resonance with the work of Smithson, Dion, and Wilson. They constitute *one* alternative story among many; an archaeology of the contemporary past, that along with the work of the three artists, makes material things matter by gleaning from what has fallen outside the realm of discourse.

Chapter 5. Publication:
Conclusion

> Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom.
> Robert Smithson[416]

Introduction

The preceding chapters demonstrate that every stage of the archaeological process comprises interpretive choices on the part of the archaeologist. These choices contribute to shape the outcome of the investigation and thereby our knowledge of the past. Either intentionally or unintentionally the work of Robert Smithson, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson brings attention to such dynamics even in the absence of concrete material traces. Thus, the artists' proposals resonate with the kind of archaeology that Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley put forth, one that no longer depends on the existence of discipline's object of study, but that stands on its own as a social practice *making* the past knowable in the here and now. Of course, both the artists and archaeologists realize that while advancing such a constructivist view of the past, and history in general, they too inhabit unstable places that condition their work.

Unsurprisingly, the publication of an archaeological text constitutes the summation of results from the research process as well as the series of operations that allowed them to exist, regardless of a formal acknowledgement of the latter within the document itself. As a finalized text, this dissertation ensues the same logic; it includes the results of an investigation indebted to several opaque practices that guided its itinerary, not always in a deliberate fashion. While some of these "incidents" helped to advance the original objectives of the research others, limited and/or detoured its goals raising a set of new problems that

[416] Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement" [1972], *Writings*, 155.

invite further study and discussion. Rather than presenting a closing argument based on the evidence provided in earlier sections, the present chapter brings the investigation to a close by offering a glimpse of the practices that contributed to the present state of the manuscript.

Incidents of Dissertation-Writing in College Park

The production of this dissertation covered a period of over two years, from late 2002 to the beginning of 2005. As archaeological investigations, the research process included the formulation of the problem, the acquisition of information from primary and secondary sources, the analysis of the information, as well as the synthetic interpretation from all of the above. While the criteria for selecting the topic of investigation appear in the introduction and the first chapter of the manuscript, the practices and decisions that came along the stages of data acquisition, analysis and synthetic interpretation remain less straightforward.

In terms of data acquisition, the ephemeral and site-specific nature of the artworks under study played a key role in my approach to them. Because I did not witness any of the installations during "real time," namely while on view to the public, I could only relate to these projects through documents. This was not an issue regarding Smithson's *Incidents* since he conceived the work itself as a document. The artist's travel companions were the only ones to experience *in situ* the series of installations that he addressed in the narrative. In contrast, Dion's archaeological projects in London and New England comprised a public performative component to which I did not have access. In the case of the *Tate Thames Dig*, I only had a first-hand encounter with the third phase of the project. This part of the work, still on view at the Tate Modern in the spring of 2004 (Fig. 43), includes the cabinets of curiosities that keep the findings retrieved and sorted out in the phases of beachcombing and

analysis. My physical encounter with *New England Digs* occurred at the artist's residence, where he stores the remnants of the project as discussed in Chapter Three.

In order to overcome the lack of intended interaction with Dion's projects, I embarked on a field trip in the spring of 2004 to Philadelphia to participate in another of his works, *The Urban Field Station of The Museum of The American Philosophical Society* (Fig. 44). Unlike the archaeological digs, Dion was not part of the installation after setting it up, leaving the visiting public to interact with the Society's staff. However, the opportunity to meet the artist later that summer allowed me to ask him several questions about the active context of the dig installations that I had pieced together through secondary sources. Needless to say, many of my readings of those sources, as well as the assumptions that stemmed from them, were inaccurate. This should not mean that I took every one of Dion's statements at face value or free from contradiction, but he certainly helped to clarify and enrich my approach to his work. Moreover, my questions enabled the artist to look at his own practice retrospectively and on a comparative basis.

Although Fred Wilson's installations at the Maryland Historical Society and the Seattle Art Museum did not contemplate performance on his part while on view, they were highly site-specific. *Mining the Museum* and *Mixed Metaphors* used the institutions' collections as raw material, but the installations themselves did not take over the entire museum spaces. As Wilson and viewers note, an important aspect of both shows relied on the possibility to appreciate the contrast between the installations and the rest of the exhibits on display at each institution. Once again, writings and photographs mediated my encounter with these projects. In January of 2001, however, I had the opportunity to visit Wilson's retrospective at The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which featured a fragment of

Mining the Museum. Not only did such an experience take place long before I formulated this dissertation, but its re-presentation of the museum project with "Cabinetmaking" had little to do with its full-fledged original version. Indeed, by the end of 2004 I met Wilson in his Brooklyn studio (Fig. 45), where he commented on how that fragment of the Baltimore show had become something else—a non-site to use Smithson's vocabulary—that he learned to enjoy in its own right, as a different experience between the audience and the piece.

While documents rightly mediated my relationship with Smithson's *Incidents*, they also mediated my relationship with the artist himself. Smithson was not available to directly "correct" or enrich my interpretation of his work, but unrestricted access to his Library and Papers housed at the Archives of American Art filled in, providing a new dimension of inquiry (Fig. 46). Going through the extensive writings of the artist, both published and unpublished, as well as his personal books and magazines enabled me to consider them not only for their content, but also for their quality as printed matter, *his* printed matter. Additionally, in the fall of 2004 I visited the artist's retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles that gathered a significant selection of his work (Fig. 47). As had Wilson's retrospective, Smithson's proved to be a site of constant reinscription and displacement, bringing together works that had never been exhibited next to one another.

I do not intend to suggest that the shortcomings inherent in the approach to site-specific ephemeral artworks cancel out their analysis. On the contrary, these limitations act as patent reminders of one's mediating role when interpreting *any* kind of situation. For example, while as an archaeologist I take the absence of "systemic contexts"—where objects actively participate in a behavioral system—as a given, those contexts are so far removed

from their material residues that they detract perspective from the sense of what was lost.[417] Departing from those concrete residues, however, archaeologists focus on the afterlife of material culture, which eventually offers hints on the network of activities during their "lifetime." Thus, I became increasingly interested throughout the course of this investigation in the ways in which archaeology's unique relation to matter can contribute to thinking about contemporary art.

Specifically, I began to consider the material leftovers of each installation as archaeological objects attempting to trace stories of dispersal, of multiple contexts of use, reuse, exchange, discard, and, ultimately, of the shifting meanings invested to them. These are issues not necessarily foreseen by any of the artists; when asked about the topic during interviews, Dion and Wilson, in fact, did not confer the same importance that I did to the aftermath of their work. Ironically, the artists' projects help materialize critical reflection in archaeology, but they take great pains to consider the ways in which their own work can continue to matter, even long after its intended active-exhibition life. Although exceeding the timeframe and objectives of this research, the fragmentary material nature of much contemporary artwork opens a new path to social interrogation.

Except for the field trips mentioned in previous paragraphs, in addition to a few others to local libraries, most of the making of this manuscript took place indoors, in two different desks: one at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, during a nine-month fellowship, and the other in my apartment in College Park (Fig. 48 and Fig. 49). In both places I read material, took notes, sorted images, went through previous field notes while devising analytical categories to make sense out of an ever-growing body of information. In

[417] Michael B. Schiffer, *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987, 3.

the process, I produced considerable amounts of material culture ranging from outlines of chapters to several versions of each. After reviewing drafts and discarding many of them, the manuscript arrived to its present state. Whether visible or invisible, all these practices led to a fertile dialogue between contemporary art and archaeology. This enduring and necessary relationship awaits to be perennially re-written.

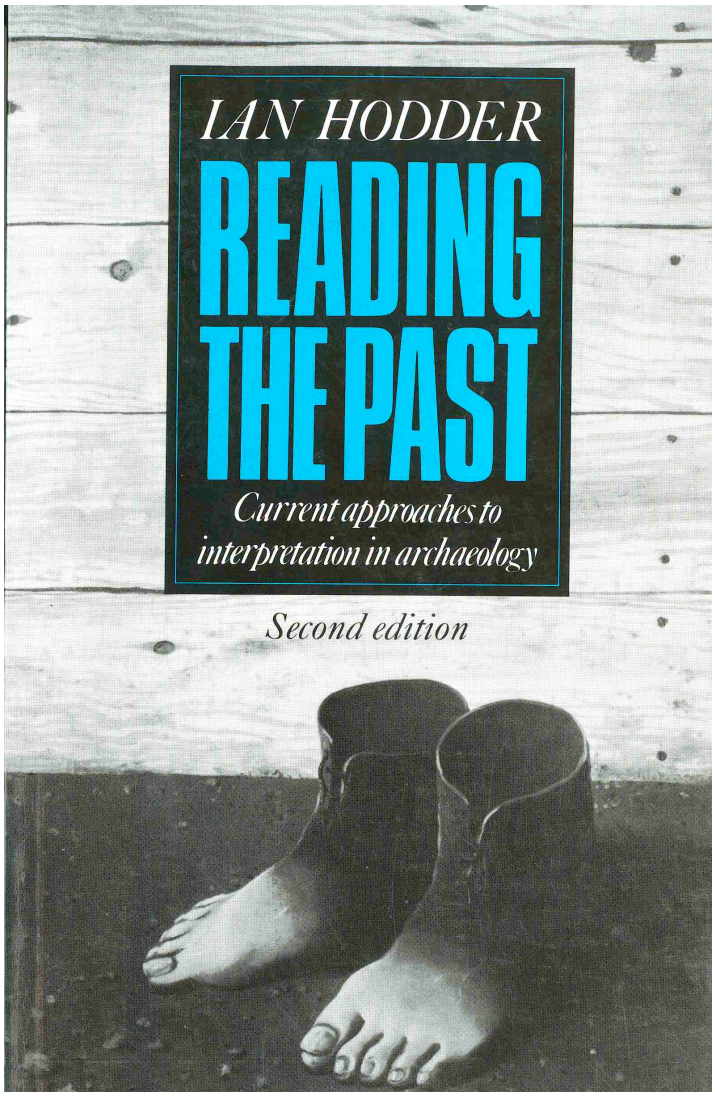


Figure 1. Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 1991, second edition. Front cover (René Magritte, *The Red Model*, 1935).

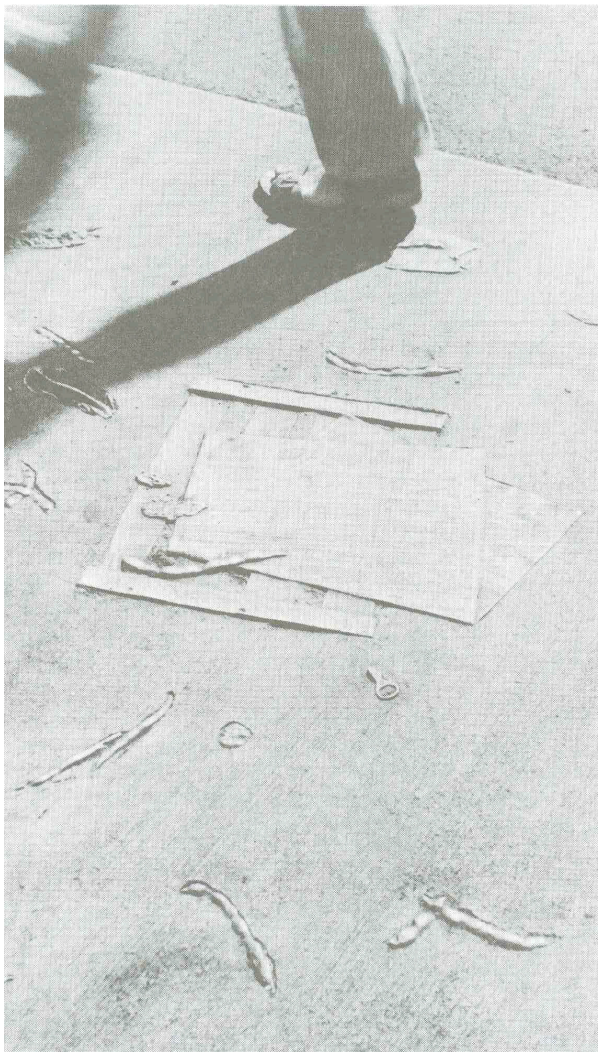


Figure 2. Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*,1991, second edition. Frontispiece (Mags Harries, *Asaraton 1976 [Unswept floor]*)

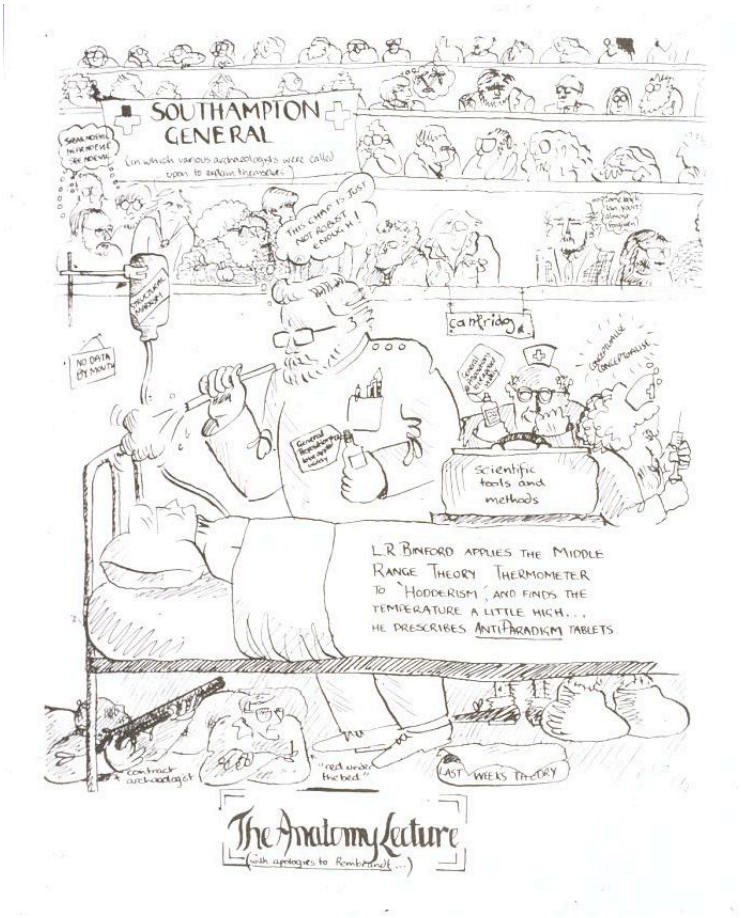


Figure 3. "The Anatomy Lecture," *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, ed. Ian Hodder, Cambridge: Cambdridge University Press, 1982.

Figure 4. Mark Tansey, *Triumph of the New York School*, 1984. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Fig. 5. Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque #7*, 1969. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

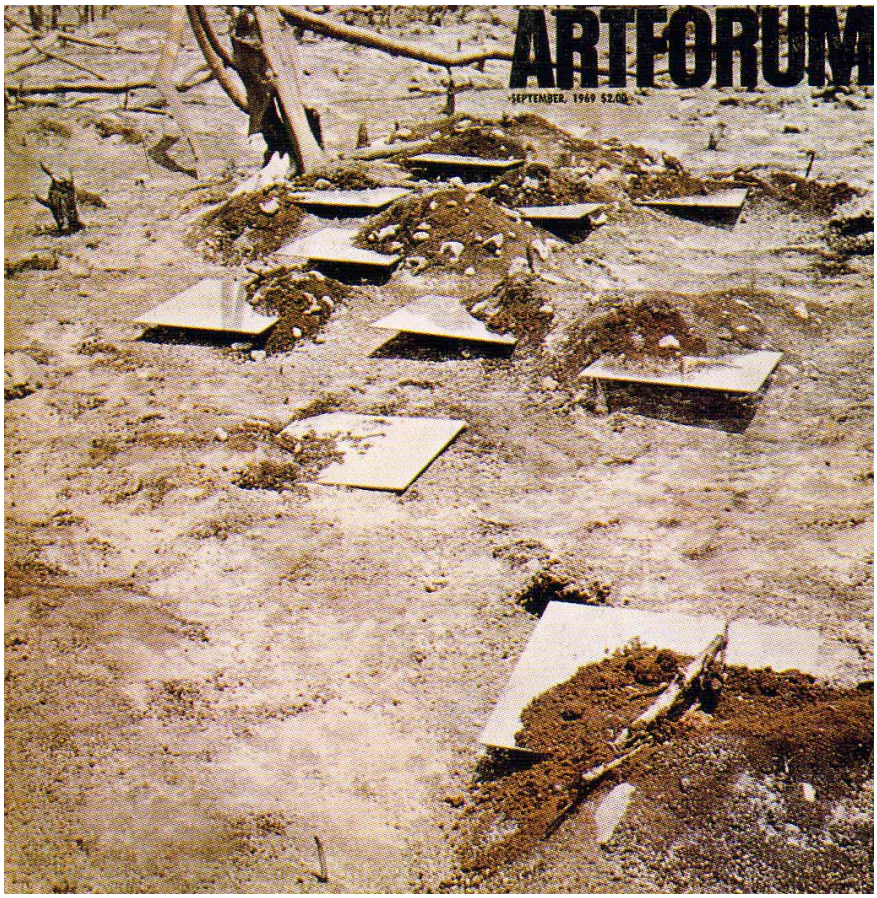
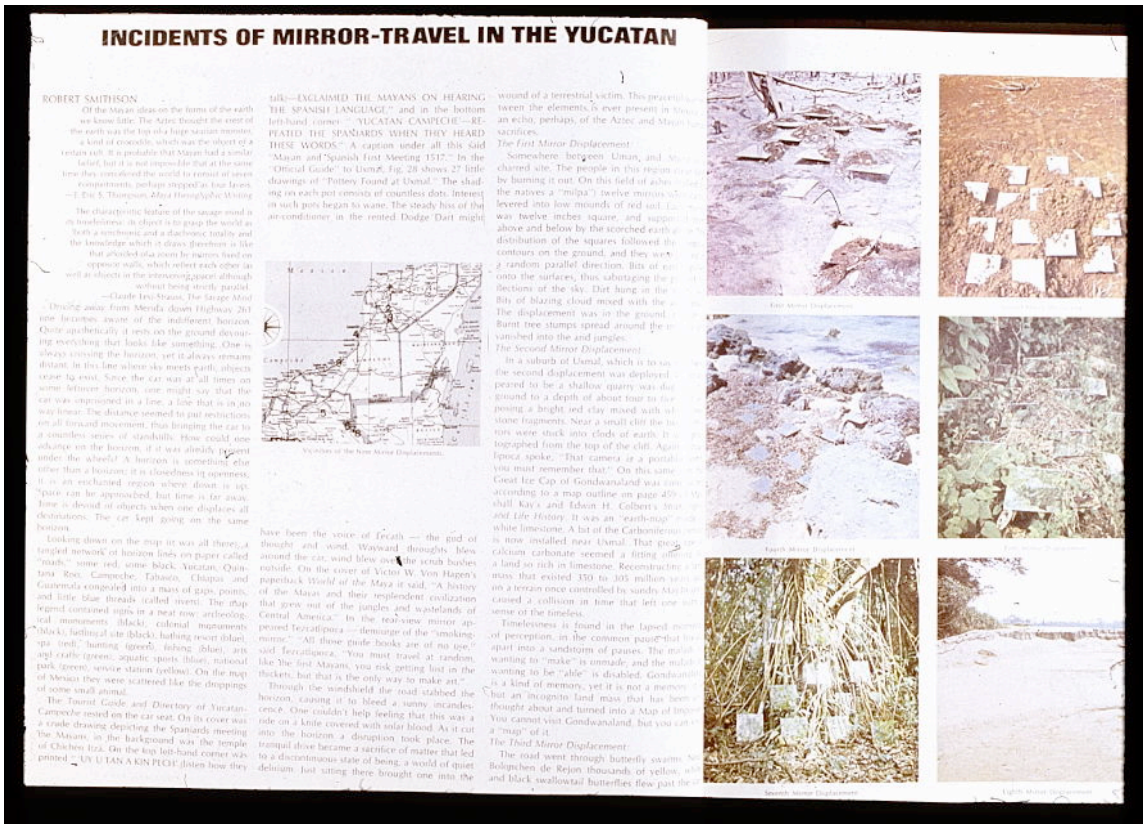


Fig. 6. *Artforum*, September 1969.



INCIDENTS OF MIRROR-TRAVEL IN THE YUCATAN

ROBERT SMITHSON

Fig. 7. Robert Smithson, *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, 1969. Magazine article in *Artforum*, September 1969.

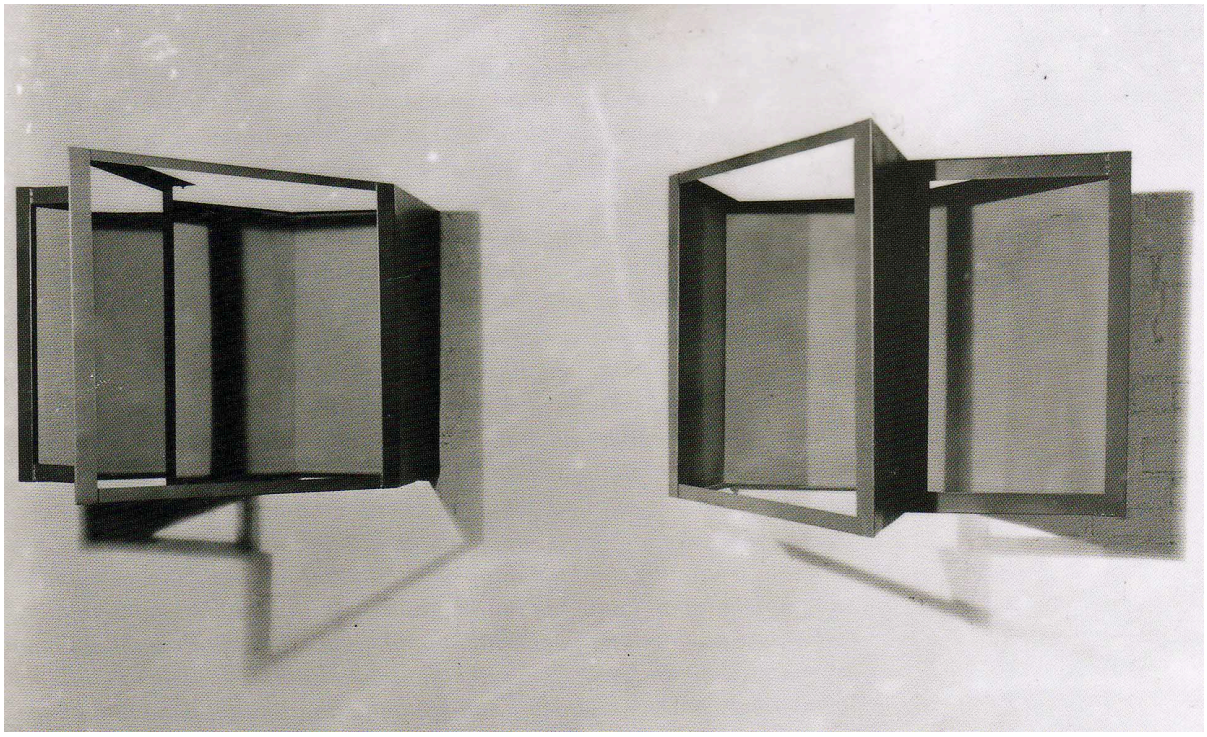


Fig. 8. Robert Smithson, *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965. Location unknown.

Fig. 9. Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* 1-9, 1969. *Artforum* (September 1969). Chromogenic slides, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Fig. 10. Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacement #1*, 1969. Chromogenic slide, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

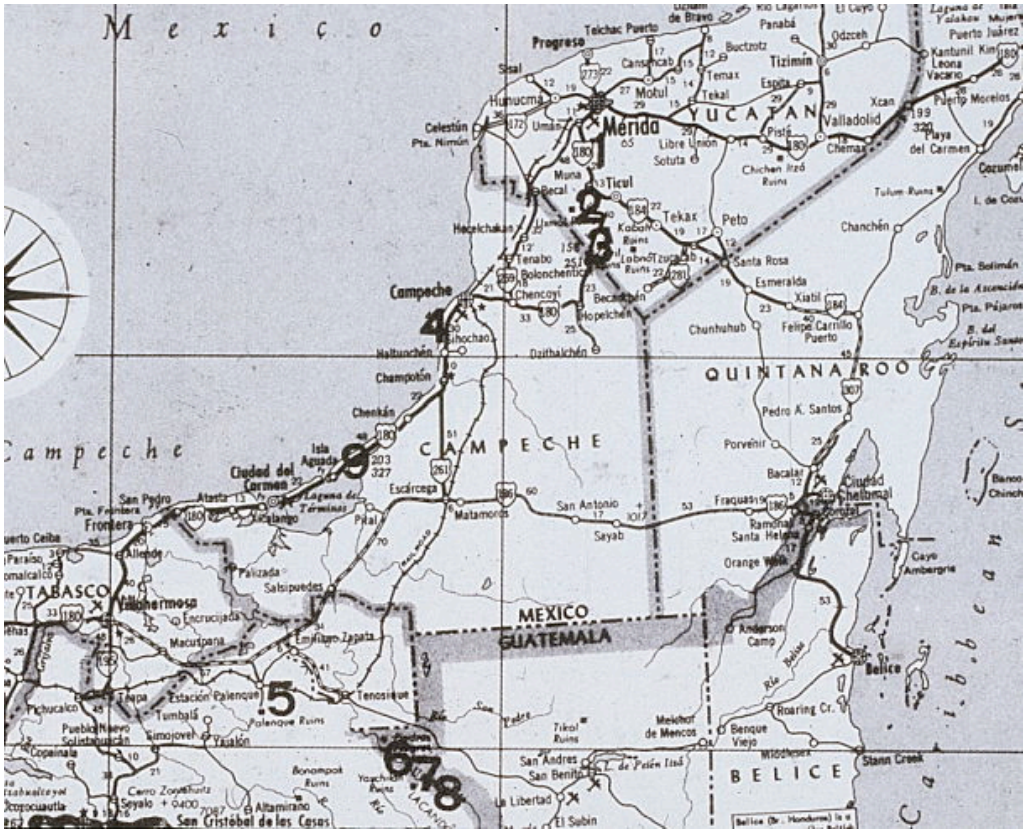


Fig. 11. Robert Smithson, map showing vicinities of the Nine Yucatan Mirror Displacements. *Artforum* (September 1969).

Fig. 12. Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacement #2*, 1969. Chromogenic slide, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Fig. 13. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey),* 1968. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

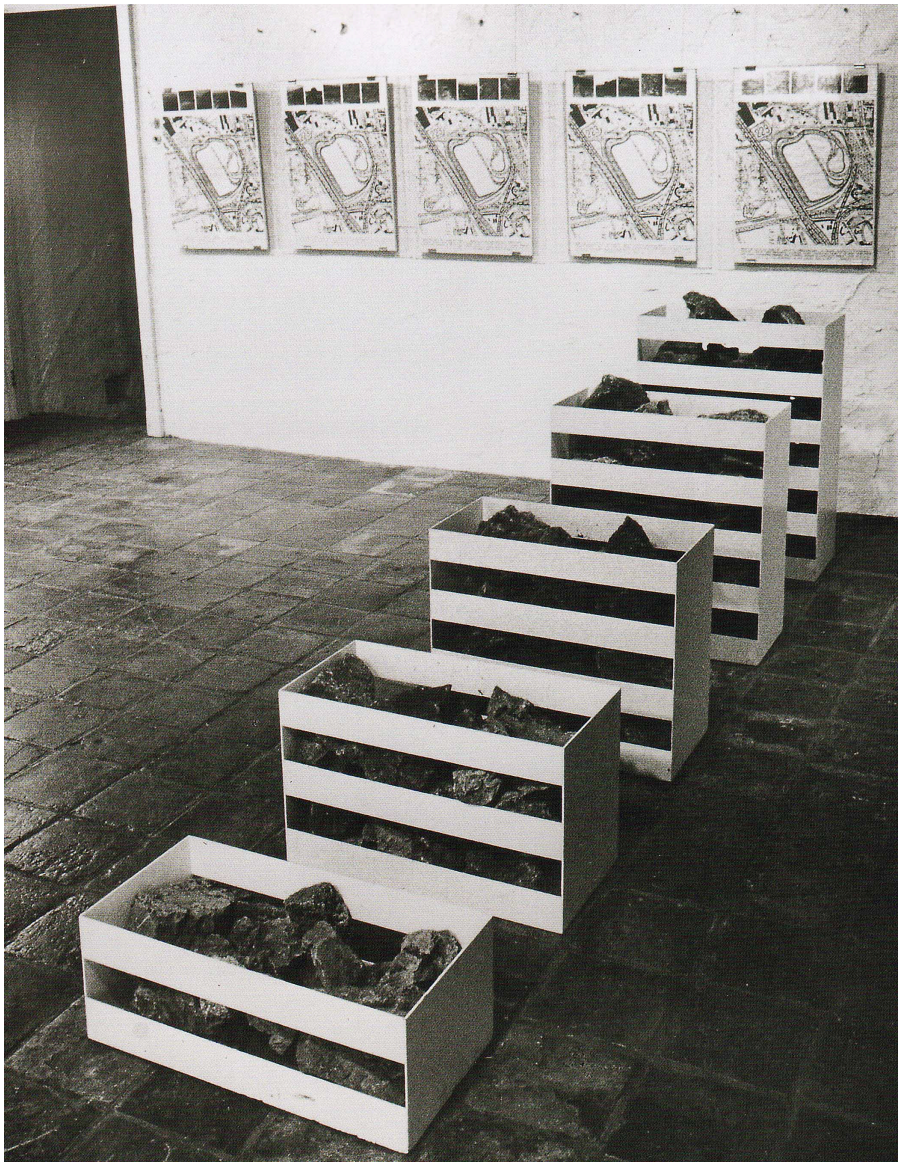


Fig. 14. Robert Smithson, *Nonsite (Oberhausen, Germany)*, 1968. Private Collection.

Fig. 15. Robert Smithson, *Mirror Displacement (Cayuga Salt Mine Project)*, 1969, Staten Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

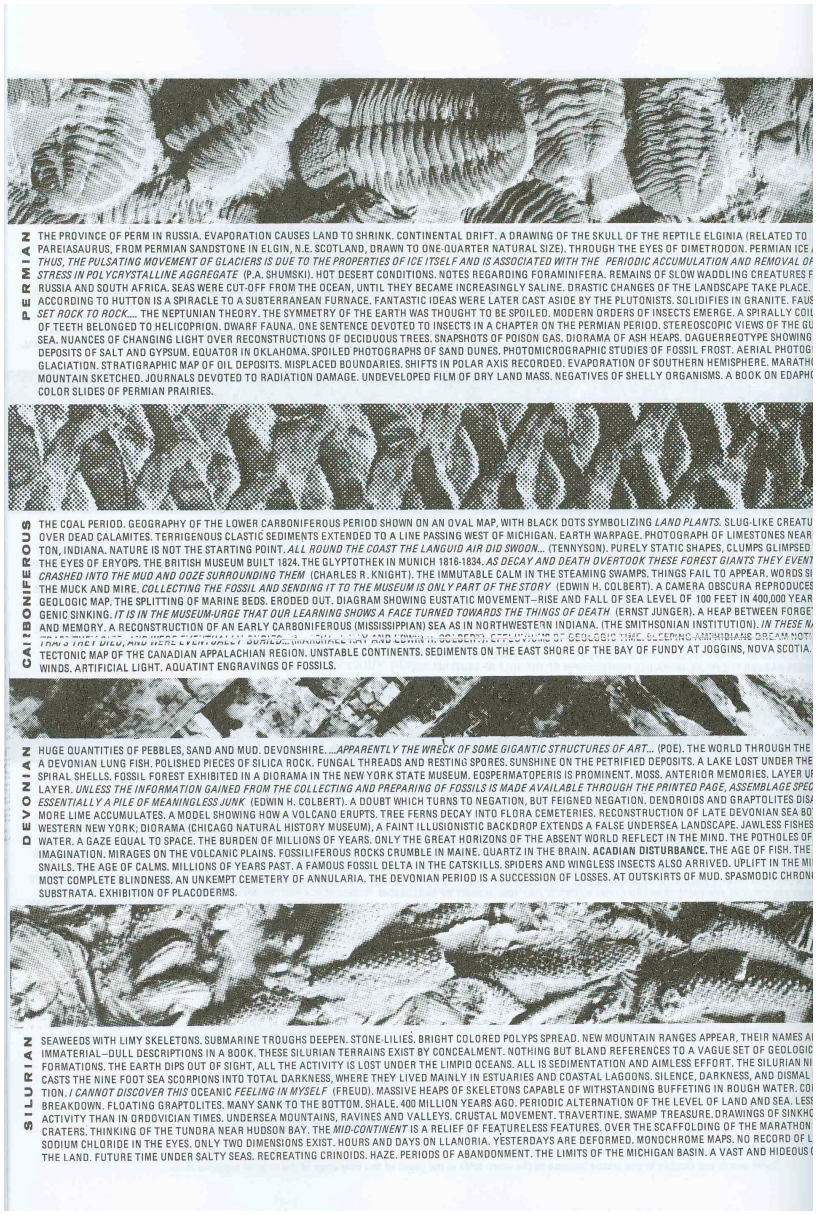


Fig. 16. Robert Smithson, *Strata A Geophotographic Fiction*, 1970, Magazine article in Aspen, nº8, 1970-71.

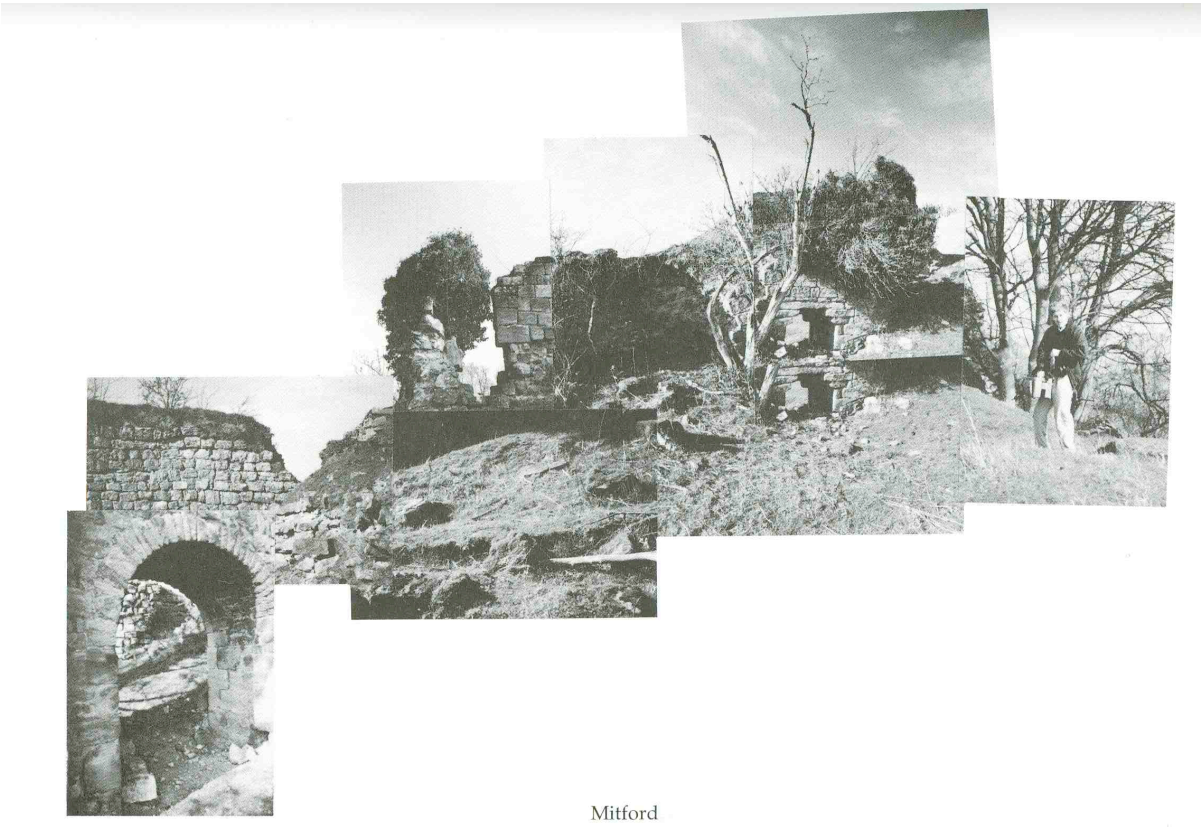


Fig. 17. Michael Shanks, Mitford castle in Northumberland, England. Photomontage in Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, 1992.

Dialectic of Site and Nonsite

Site	*Nonsite*
1. Open Limits	Closed Limits
2. A Series of Points	An Array of Matter
3. Outer Coordinates	Inner Coordinates
4. Subtraction	Addition
5. Indeterminate Certainty	Determinate Uncertainty
6. Scattered Information	Contained Information
7. Reflection	Mirror
8. Edge	Center
9. Some Place (physical)	No Place (abstract)
10. Many	One

Fig. 18. Robert Smithson, "Dialectic of Site and Nonsite," in "Spiral Jetty," magazine article in *Arts and the Environment*, edited by Gyorgy Kepes, 1972.

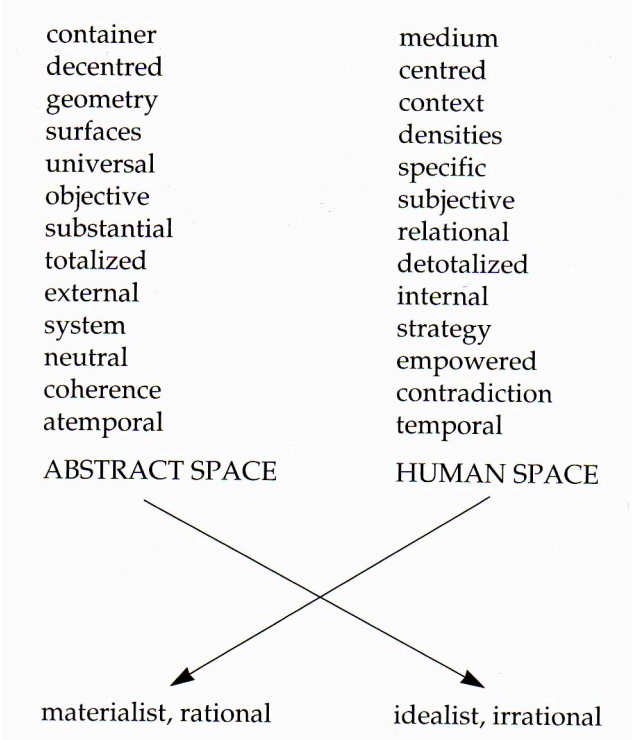


Fig. 19. Christopher Tilley, diagram summarizing the major differences between abstract and human space. Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*, 1994.

Fig. 20. Mark Dion, “Mark Dion beachcombing on London’s Foreshore,” *Tate Thames Dig*, Site I, 1999. Tate Modern.

Fig.21. Mark Dion, “Millbank Site,” *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999. Tate Modern.

Fig. 22. Mark Dion, “Bank Site – Detail,” *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999. Tate Modern.

Fig.23. Mark Dion, *History Trash Scan*, 1996. Galleria Emi Fontana.

Fig.24. Mark Dion, "Laboratory/Collection," *Raiding Neptune's Vault*, 1997/98. Galleria Emi Fontana.

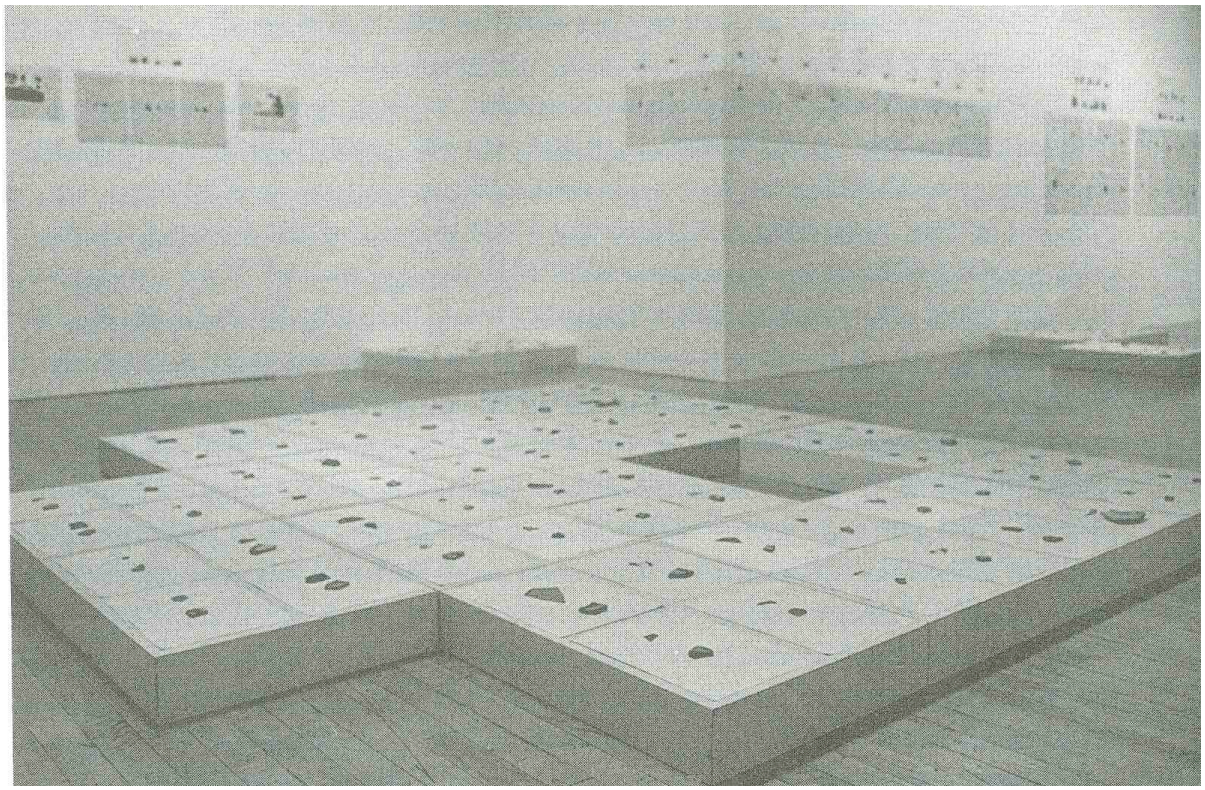


Fig. 25. Susan Hiller, *Fragments*, 1978. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

Fig. 26. Mark Dion, "A selection of Mark Dion's journals and notebooks," *Mark Dion: Drawings, Journals, Photographs, Souvenirs, and Trophies 1990-2003*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art.

Fig. 27. Mark Dion, “Detail,” *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999. Tate Gallery of Modern Art.

Fig. 28. Mark Dion, *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999, Tate Gallery of Modern Art.

Fig. 29. Mark Dion, *New England Digs*, 2001. Fuller Museum of Art.

Fig. 30. Charles Wilson Peale, *The Artist in his Museum*, 1822. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Fig. 31. Mark Dion and the author in front of his storage facility, Beach Lake, PA. (Photo Ben Benus).

Fig. 32. Shelves with some of the contents of *New England Digs* in Mark Dion's storage facility, Beach Lake, PA. (Photo by the author).

Fig. 33. Mark Dion, "Anthropology Department," *Angelica Point*, 1994, Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan.

Fig. 34. Mark Dion, “Archaeology Laboratory,” Rescue Archaeology: A Project for the Museum of Modern Art, 2004-05. (Photo by the author).

Fig. 35. Fred Wilson, “Globe Trophy,” c.1913, *Mining the Museum*, 1992. Maryland Historical Society.

Fig. 36. Fred Wilson, “Metalwork 1793-1880,” *Mining the Museum*, 1992. Maryland Historical Society.

Fig. 37. Fred Wilson, “Cabinetmaking 1820-1960,” *Mining the Museum*, 1992. Maryland Historical Society.

Fig. 38. Fred Wilson in one of the storage areas, Seattle Art Museum, 1993.

Fig. 39. Fred Wilson having a meeting with the curatorial staff, Seattle Art Museum, 1993.

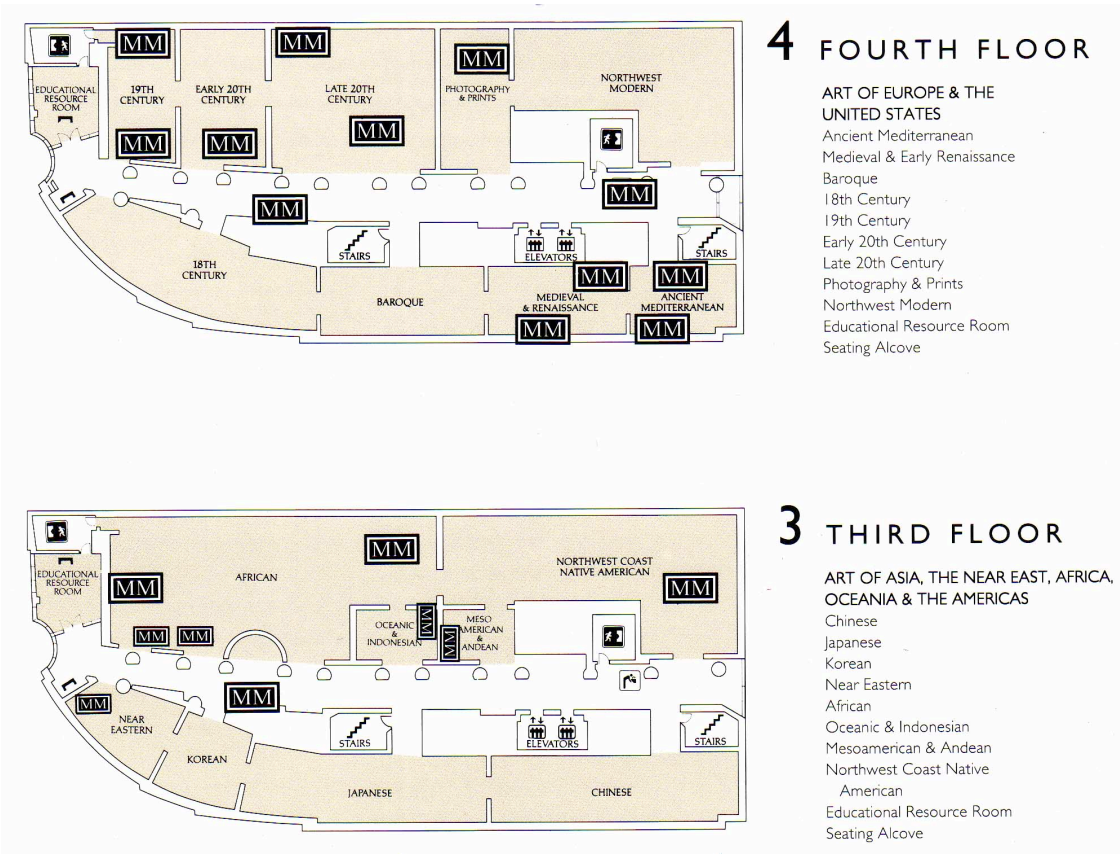


Fig. 40. Map showing the distribution of *Mixing Metaphors* at Seattle Art Museum, 1993.

Fig. 41. Fred Wilson, “Push,” *Mixed Metaphors*, 1993. Seattle Art Museum.

Fig. 42. Fred Wilson, “Re-Seeing Modernism,” *Mixed Metaphors*. Seattle Art Museum.

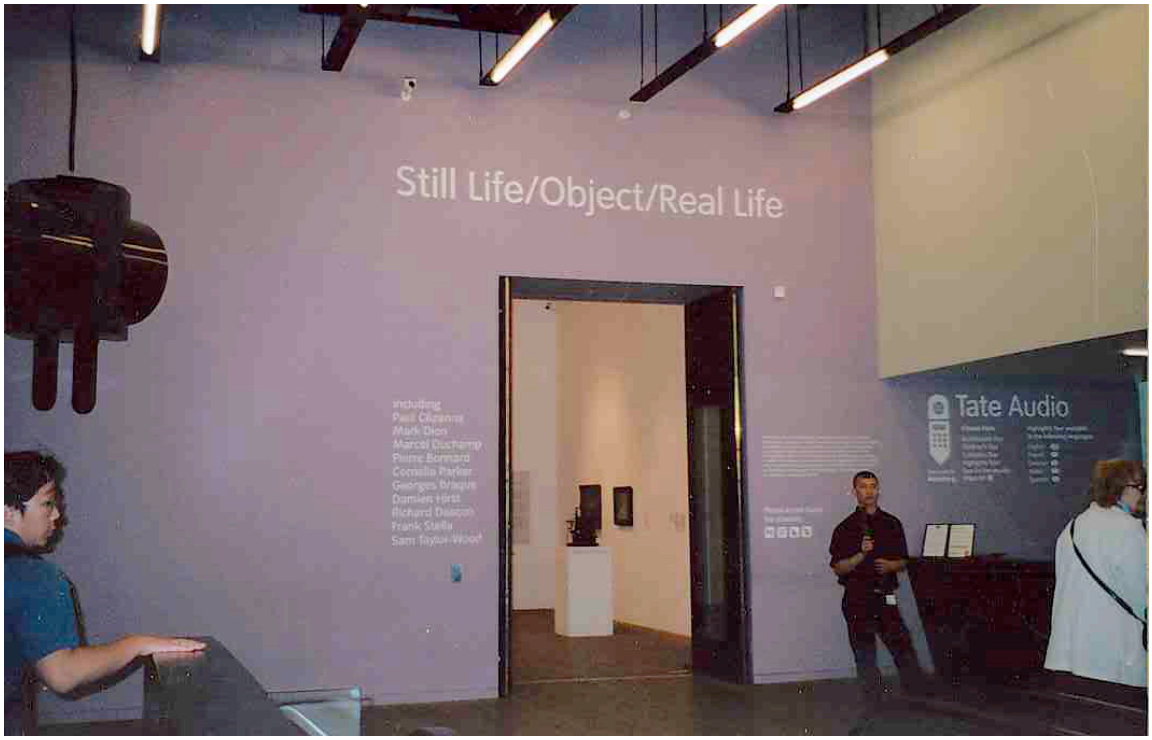


Fig. 43. Entrance to exhibition gallery with Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig*, Tate Gallery of Modern, 2004. (Photo by the author).

Fig. 44. The author taking part of Mark Dion's *The Urban Field Station of The Museum of The American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, 2004. (Photo Tanya Jung).

Fig. 45. Fred Wilson and the author in his Brooklyn studio, 2004. (Photo Fred Wilson's assistant).

Fig. 46. Robert Smithson Library, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2003. (Photo by the author).

Fig. 47. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004. (Photo by passer-by).

Fig. 48. Author's desk, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2004. (Photo by the author).

Fig. 49. Author's desk, College Park, Maryland, 2005. (Photo by the author).

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